

A PHENOMENOLOGY OF PLACE IDENTITY FOR WONDER VALLEY, CALIFORNIA:  
HOMESTEADERS, DYSTOPICS, AND UTOPICS

by

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M.A., Arizona State University, 2003

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Geography  
College of Arts and Sciences

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

2010



## Abstract

Sprawling over 180 square miles of California's Mojave Desert, Wonder Valley was founded in the early 1950s and today is an unincorporated community of approximately 1,000 residents. The community's landscape is expansive and unsettling, featuring a chaotic assortment of residences that include abandoned homesteads, squatter settlements, artists' studios, middle-class cabins, and luxury vacation properties. This dissertation explores Wonder Valley's enigmatic place identity from residents' point of view, drawing on an experiential understanding of place grounded in humanistic and phenomenological geography. Specifically, the dissertation makes use of Edward Relph's explication of place identity to guide empirical inquiry and conceptual structure.

Drawing on resident interviews, place observations, and textual analysis, the dissertation identifies and explicates three distinct Wonder Valley identities—*homesteaders*, *dystopics*, and *utopics*. Arriving in the 1950s, homesteaders were Wonder Valley's first inhabitants and express a practical connection to the landscape that is interpreted in terms of *environmental reach*, specifically, the creation, maintenance, and extension of environmental and place order. During the 1970s, as many homesteaders abandoned Wonder Valley, dystopics arrived and today include two subgroups: first, a criminal element pulled to Wonder Valley because of its local isolation but regional proximity to Los Angeles; and, second, destitute squatters pushed out from other communities and having nowhere else to go. The third group identified is utopics, primarily artists from Los Angeles and San Francisco, who arrived in the early 1990s, attracted by Wonder Valley's natural beauty and sacred ambience.

The dissertation explores how these three groups arrived at different times, for different reasons, to create vastly different landscapes, to engage in opposing aims and activities, and to

understand Wonder Valley's meaning as a place in greatly contrasting ways. These differences in meaning are most directly expressed in the common areas of public land, which have often become sites of inter-group tension and conflict, particularly in regard to abandoned homesteads and the use of off-road vehicles. To interpret this group conflict conceptually, the dissertation develops what is termed *existential ecotone*— a unique mode of place experience generated by overlapping but contrasting modes of being-in-place.

Keywords: *Place identity, ecotone, phenomenology, desert, California.*

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Making use of resident interviews, place observations, and textual analysis, the dissertation identifies and explicates three distinct Wonder Valley identities—*homesteaders*, *dystopics*, and *utopics*. Arriving in the 1950s, homesteaders were Wonder Valley's first inhabitants and express a practical connection to the landscape that is interpreted in terms of *environmental reach*, specifically, the creation, maintenance, and extension of environmental and place order. During the 1970s, as many homesteaders abandoned Wonder Valley, dystopics arrived and today include two subgroups: first, a criminal element pulled to Wonder Valley because of its local isolation but regional proximity to Los Angeles; and, second, destitute squatters pushed out from other communities and having nowhere else to go. The third group identified is utopics, primarily artists from Los Angeles and San Francisco, who arrived in the early 1990s, attracted by Wonder Valley's natural beauty and sacred ambience.

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## **Dedication**

To the people of Wonder Valley, California, and to anyone who reads this document and finds some sort of inspiration to better understand the human experience.



## CHAPTER 1 – Emplacing Wonder Valley



## Discovering Wonder Valley

Wonder Valley is an unincorporated desert community in San Bernardino County, California, surrounded by Los Angeles sprawl to the west, Joshua Tree National Park to the south, The Marine Corps Air and Ground Combat Center to the north, and millions of acres of Mojave Desert wilderness to the east. Highway 62 bisects the valley's nearly 180 square miles and is one of the few paved roads for the approximately 1,000 residents. Settlement of the valley owes its origins to the Small Tract Act of 1938, which called for the sale of federal lands in no larger than five-acre tracts to the public (Ainsworth 1955).



**Figure 1.1 Wonder Valley's location (red box).**

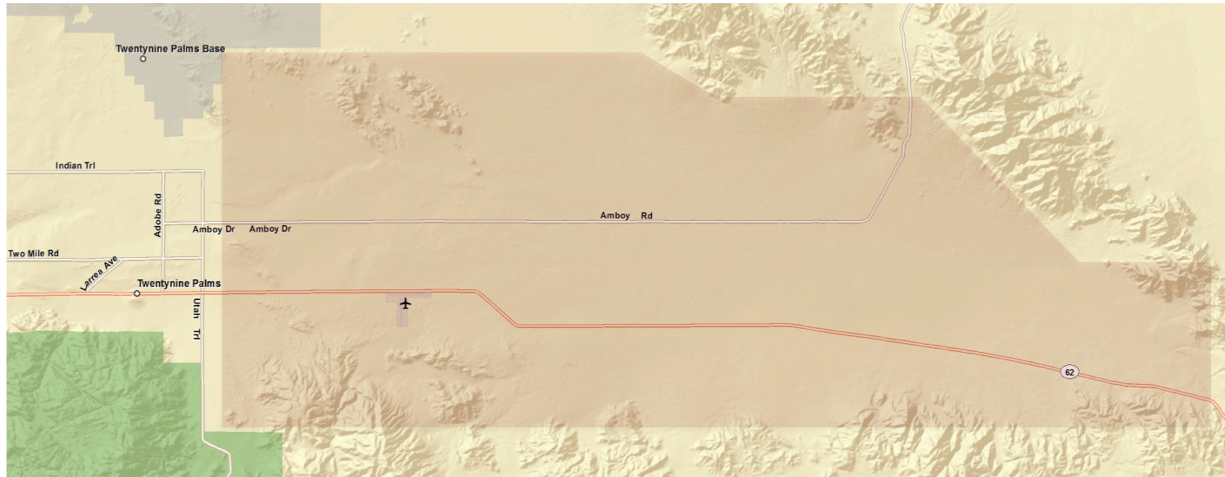
Most of these converted public lands were located in the high desert (elevations ranging from 2,000 to 4,000 feet) northeast of the Los Angeles basin. Because the lease and sale of the tracts were heavily advertised in Los Angeles newspapers in the 1950s, most buyers came from the Los Angeles area. They were required to pay a minimal fee and build at least a twenty-by-

twenty-foot structure to gain eventual ownership of the land (BLM 1980). These desert migrants primarily used their homesteads as recuperative retreats or as places to retire. Once, however, they experienced the harsh reality of desert living in a place with little or no service infrastructure, many property owners abandoned the Mojave. By the 1980s, hundreds, if not thousands, of vacant shacks littered the landscape as only a few hundred residents managed to stay and maintain a community in this demanding environment (BLM 1980; Darlington 1996; Ross 2007).

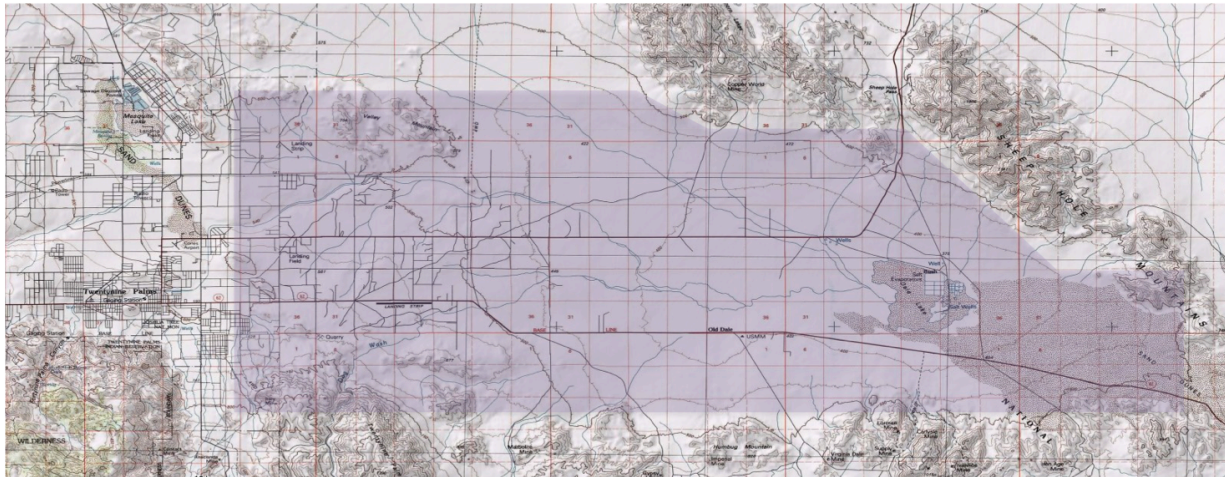
This trend of abandonment abruptly ended in the mid 1990s, when the sprawling fingers of Los Angeles urbanization provided modern services, easier access to the desert hinterland, and a population in the midst of a renewed appreciation for the desert. The result was that the area experienced a new boom in attention, tourists, and settlement. Wonder Valley was especially affected by this demographic reversal. Instead of a dull brown (Bureau of Land Management (BLM)) surrounding the community on the map, Wonder Valley was now bordered by National Park Service (NPS) green and quickly attracted hundreds of artists and their patrons.

Today, the two-to-five-acre properties stand in stark contradiction to each other as abandoned homestead cabins intermingle with postmodern art studios, prefabricated ranch homes, tattered mobile homes, scrap yards, shooting ranges, and vacant BLM land all randomly “checkerboarding” the desert valley. These variations on the cultural landscape are manifestations of conflicting expectations and experiences of a place I first experienced in the winter of 1994.

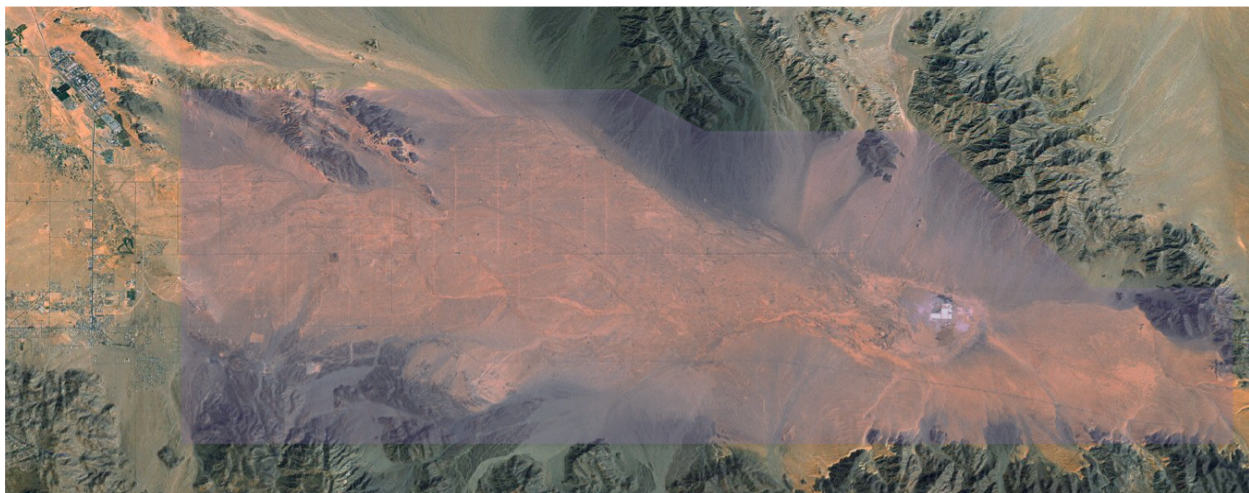




**Figure 1.2 Highway & major streets map (Wonder Valley shaded).**



**Figure 1.3 Topographical map (Wonder Valley shaded).**



**Figure 1.4 Satellite Image (Wonder Valley shaded).**

...

*December 22, 1994.* As I left the plane and cautiously walked down the jetway, I was caught off guard by a cold mist of rain peppering my skin. My exposure was made worse by a decision to rely upon postcard and Hollywood imagery of the desert instead of a weather report to guide my clothing selection. I assumed the desert would be warm and sun-drenched with no water in sight. Instead, I entered a landscape enveloped in darkness and highlighted only by a cold breeze, a concoction of rain and sleet, and a few shadowy palm fronds waving in the distance.

This was the scene that greeted me as I deplaned the American Airlines MD80 at the Palm Springs airport. It is true that forty-five degrees and rain is better than single digits and a snow-packed landscape. But was this my reward for months of anxiously waiting in a cold Midwestern December for a bright and warm California landscape? No matter what the conditions were like back in Illinois, the thrill and anticipation of going to the desert and the yearning for a warm place made this arrival anticlimactic. I did, however, welcome the sight of my grandparents at the baggage claim and impatiently awaited my arrival to their winter home in Wonder Valley, just sixty miles away.

As I exited the airport, I searched my senses for clues to this new but unexpectedly frigid desert place. Almost instantly, a strange odor resembling an electrical fire caught my attention. My grandfather told me the peculiar smell was the desert after a storm, and though the rain had just let up there was still a layer of low-lying clouds blocking the stars. The only presence of natural light came from the muted luminescence of the rising full moon. The desert on a rainy night was not what I expected, but in following visits to Wonder Valley I learned not only to

accept but to expect paradoxical situations, or as my grandfather says, “Being surprised here is the only thing that isn’t surprising.”

As we drove up from the Coachella Valley into the high desert, I peered from the backseat window, straining to spot sand-covered mountains or a forest of Joshua Trees. But all that removed my own reflection in the backseat window was an assortment of streetlights and neon signs emanating from the businesses lining the desert towns along Highway 62. Although town names such as Yucca Valley, Joshua Tree, and Twentynine Palms stirred my curiosity, I was more concerned with seeing my grandparent’s cabin and exploring the storied environs of Wonder Valley. During the hour-long drive, my grandfather’s tales about Wonder Valley’s fantastic natural beauty, its dangerous residents, and overall disturbing human geography raced through my mind. The stories of being chased by wild dogs, finding dead bodies, uncovering drug laboratories, riding off-road vehicles alongside coyotes, and the encounters with eclectic neighbors kept my imagination filling in what my eyes could not see peering into the dark.

At 10 P.M., we made our way past the eastern outskirts of Twentynine Palms and approached Wonder Valley. I could tell we were getting close because the asphalt ended and the sandy washboard desert roads began. The car rattled down the path. All I could see were hundreds of what looked like barnyard lights indicating cabins with electricity. We turned and followed a few sandy roads for another ten minutes, finally arriving at my grandparents’ cabin. I looked around, but the darkness veiled the surroundings. I was impressed with the stillness surrounding the desert cabin. I also discovered that flip-flops were not made for the desert. After kicking up a good deal of sand, I removed them and was unpleasantly surprised by freezing cold grains of sand oozing between my toes. I took my luggage from the Explorer, and went to my bedroom. I pushed back the blinds of the bedroom window but yet again saw nothing.

For the two years before my visit, my grandparents had filled my imagination with the magnificent scenery, the untamed citizens, and the extraordinary nature of Wonder Valley. As I tried to sleep, my imagination filled in the darkness that surrounded the cabin. I attempted to force a dream that might be worthy of this most unusual place. I closed my eyes and slowly the green florescence of the alarm clock faded away.

...

In the ten years since my first anticlimactic arrival to Wonder Valley, I have had the opportunity to visit the community at least two dozen times. What I lacked in an exciting first encounter has been superseded by numerous adventures. The stories I heard as a teen became real in my twenties. As I traveled to other places in United States, I began to realize that Wonder Valley was quite unlike other communities. The questions of “how” and “why” was it different led to an increased interest in the place’s historical and experiential geography. The story of this peculiar place and the accounts of those who still call it home needed to be explored and better understood. Only recently, however, has this pre-academic curiosity of Wonder Valley transformed itself into a formal academic study focused on the phenomenon of living in Wonder Valley. Although the community first presented itself as chaotic, over time I recognized that Wonder Valley did have an unexplained order. Finding and describing this order leads to understanding the essence of Wonder Valley—the major aim of my dissertation.

At first glance, the desert around Wonder Valley seems empty. At first glance, Wonder Valley’s landscape appears disarrayed and chaotic. Many times I have found that at first glance our eyes deceive us. This place is unusual not because of its disorder, which can be expected in a rural desert landscape. Rather, Wonder Valley is unusual and, thus, a place of interest for geographers because it presents some type of order where one would more likely expect chaos.

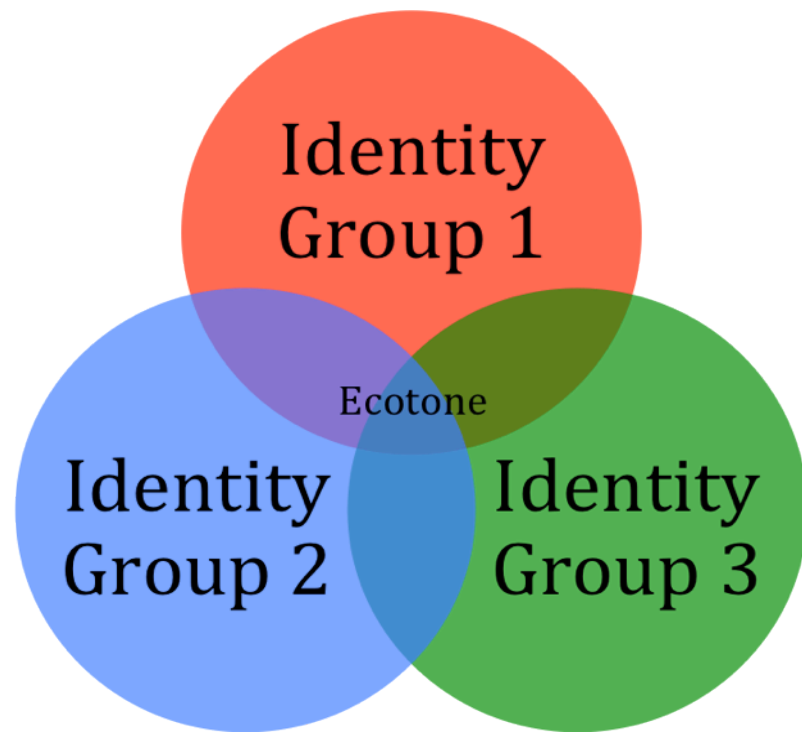
At highway speeds the landscape seems in disarray, but the people who call those structures home are not here by accident. They moved here, and now they fight for their vision of what ‘here’ should be. My research focuses much longer, closer, and more deeply on a place that, at first glance, seems misplaced and where people seem misfits. In the following chapters, I hope to demonstrate that Wonder Valley is not misplaced but exactly where and what it should be.

When I first encountered Wonder Valley, I felt that it was on the edge of civilization. After participating in everyday life and speaking with numerous residents, however, I have found that Wonder Valley is not so much on the edge, but an overlap of different worlds that usually do not occupy the same place at the same time. There seemed to be several different “Wonder Valleys.” Serendipitously I came upon an essay that described a phenomenon present in the natural world termed, “ecotone,” literally an environment in tension. The term is used to describe “a region of transition between two biological communities.” (OED 1989) For example, a beach is an ecotone in that it is transition zone between the sea and the land. As I explored Wonder Valley and reflected on its essential nature, I found that the idea of overlapping identity groups was analogous to the phenomenon of an ecotone. In later chapters, I describe how the contrasting landscapes, activities, experiences, and meanings of Wonder Valley’s three identity groups create a type of *existential ecotone*—or a significant overlapping of different modes of human experience (Figures 1.5, 1.6).

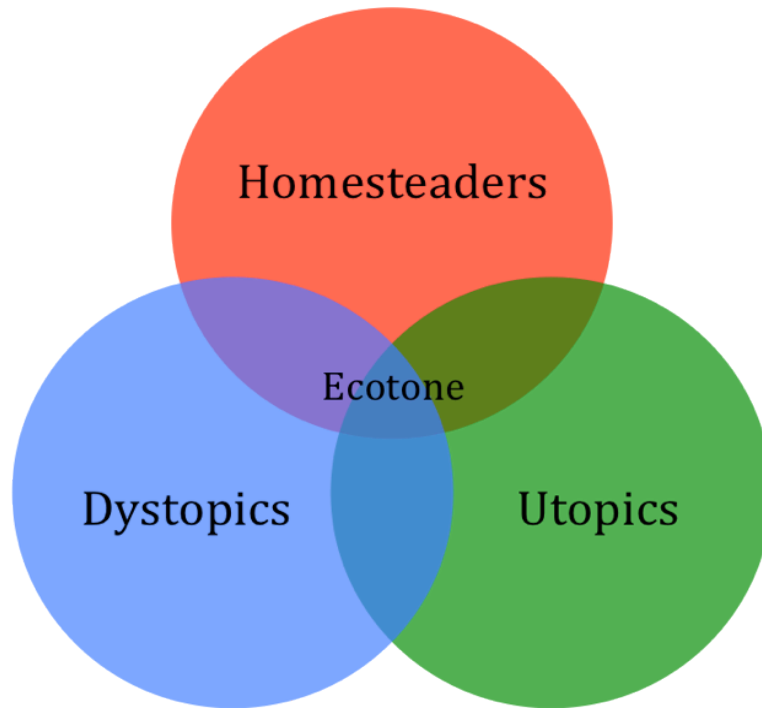
In this research “existential ecotone” refers to a phenomenon where there is an obvious overlapping of different worlds that usually do not occupy the same place at the same time. Sometimes these overlaps can be benign or beneficial, but Wonder Valley is a case in which the overlap is between two clashing modes of experience (see Table 1.1), drastically increasing intensity and conflict. These conflicting experiences are manifested geographically in vastly



different place identities (landscape, activities, and associated meanings). The conflict will only change if one of the place identities "wins," one mode becomes like the other, or both find compromise. The fact that Wonder Valley is an overlap of contrasting place meanings and experiences makes options two and three unlikely, because the conflict's inertia is well maintained through heightened intragroup solidarity with intense intergroup discord.



**Figure 1.5 Existential Ecotone Model.**



**Figure 1.6 The Existential Ecotone of Wonder Valley.**

This study examines the phenomenon of Wonder Valley as understood and experienced by its residents. The aim of this research is to investigate Wonder Valley's distinct identity groups and understand how they contribute to Wonder Valley's overall sense of place. More broadly, this research also provides an empirical, but empathetic, case study to better understand the emergence, and dynamics of an existential ecotone.

Specific questions emerge from this aim—for example, when and why did people move here? What kinds of people live in Wonder Valley? What sorts of landscapes have been created? What activities do residents participate in? What meanings do the residents attach to Wonder Valley and specific places within it? What, if any, underlying order exists? Before a thorough examination of Wonder Valley is provided, however, the philosophical assumptions that underlie this examination of place must be made explicit.



**Figure 1.7 From a distance Wonder Valley appears to be a random collection of cabins (photograph by author).**



**Figure 1.8 A closer inspection reveals signs of underlying tension (photograph by author).**

## **Conceptions of Place**

The study of place is essential to the study of geography. The National Council for Geographic Education included place as one of the five basic themes of the discipline (NCGE 1984). Sauer argued, “the facts of geography are place facts” (1963, 321). Hartshorne wrote, “the integrations which geography is concerned to analyze are those that vary from place to place” (1959, 159). Lukerman emphasized that place is important because it is a pre-scientific part of

life: “The study of place is the subject matter of geography because consciousness of place is immediately an apparent part of reality, not a sophisticated thesis; knowledge of place is a simple fact of experience” (1964, 168). The way of understanding place among geographers is not so simple, however, nor as unified as geographers’ understanding of place’s importance. Although each geographer may vary in his or her own interpretation of the nature of place, Cresswell argues that there are three major conceptual approaches currently prevalent within the discipline and social science as a whole, *chorological*, *social construction*, and *experiential* (2004, 51). Here, I use his threefold designation to lay out key conceptual approaches to place.

### ***Chorological Approach to Place***

In the first conceptual approach to place identified by Cresswell, there are no explicit theoretical explorations of the foundation of ‘place’. Instead, there are ‘real-world’ places that can be studied empirically, with focus on “casual relations between assemblages of phenomena which lend individuality to particular places” (Peet 1998, 16; from Hartshorne 1959, 13). Specific social and cultural lifeways grounded in environment and place provoke the researcher to seek out and explore particular *genres de vie* (Sauer 1925; Parsons 1976; Jackson 1980; Noble 1996). In other words, ‘place’ is a noun not a verb, a location with certain attributes to be studied for its historical development, uniqueness, and relationship to other places. Geographers working from this premise are observers studying place as an object of inquiry, a “scientific study of places—scientific in terms of a series of carefully designed regional studies employing field study which result in meaningful generalizations” (Peet 1998, 18).

This chorological approach to place became significant in the early twentieth century when Vidal de la Blache’s ‘French Tradition’ and Sauer’s ‘Berkeley School’ reacted to the

dominant conceptual perspective of environmental determinism. Though these early ‘possibilistic’ researchers mainly focused on rural places and traditional cultures, more recent studies have covered the gamut of place types—e.g., places as historical products and reflections of a particular culture (Meinig 1971, 1979, 2004; Zelinsky 1973) and the distinctiveness of individual places (Wallach 1980, 1981). Many researchers of the chorological tradition compare and contrast places as a component of a larger geographic scale with the major focus on the concepts of region and landscape. Lewis’s research on the distinctiveness of New Orleans (1976) and Jakle’s studies on urban place morphology (1992, 1996, 1999) are examples of this approach to study.

### ***Social Construction of Place***

In the second conceptual approach identified by Cresswell, place is a context of struggle, oppression, and potential liberation. Places allow the geographer to examine social, political, and economic systems by revealing the underlying processes that create and sustain places. Geographers with Marxist, post-structuralist, and feminist perspectives commonly approach place as it relates to capitalism, sexism, colonialism, and globalization.

Harvey’s *Social Justice and the City* (1973), Lefebvre’s *Production of Space* (1974), and Smith’s *Uneven Development* (1984) are key Marxist works that examine the intermingling of capitalism, society, space, and place and their effects on specific place geographies. These researchers especially focus their inquiry on the commodification of places, the concealment of capital within the material landscape, and the distancing of the effects of global capitalism from consumers’ attention (Cloke, et al. 1991). Harvey summarizes this viewpoint when he writes that “the only interesting question that can be asked is: by what social processes is place constructed”

(1996, 261). Mitchell's essay (2003) on migrant labor in California's strawberry fields is one current case study displaying a Marxist geography's treatment of place.

Rose (1993, 2001) and other feminist geographers (see for example: McDowell 1992; Kobayashi 1994; Falconer-Al-Hindi 1995) see place as a platform to discuss gendered spaces and the hegemonic power of masculinist narratives in science. To feminist geographers, the look of the land has been created by a male-dominated world; the social ills that befall power minorities, such as women and people of color, are largely hidden from view. Furthermore, how we as social scientists look at the land has been conditioned by a biased, male-dominated view that pushes other views to the side as unimportant and sometimes dangerous "Other" views. For example, hooks [sic] (1984), describes how a masculinist social science views the home as a place of retreat and safety, while for feminists it has been a place of domestic subjugation for women that continues today.

Unlike feminist theory, the postmodern understanding of place does not criticize a dominant narrative but instead discounts the idea of metanarratives entirely. This conceptual approach "rejects modern assumptions of coherence and causality entirely, arguing instead for fragmentation, multiplicity and indeterminacy" (Cloke, et al. 1991, 195). In this way of thinking, "an understandable structured world which consciousness may endow with meaning (as in existential phenomenology) becomes the spontaneous eruption of fragmentary events beyond systematic understanding" (Peet 1998, 195).

In such a relativist philosophy, one would assume that there is little cohesion among postmodern viewpoints on place, yet, surprisingly; there is a common sensitivity to difference and a lack of metanarratives. Thus, 'place' is no longer as important a concept as 'places'. This emphasis on multiplicity should not be confused with the chorological approach because places

are only important insofar as they highlight “the liberation of desire, utter cynicism or nihilistic resistance to the forces of modernity” (Baudrillard 1986; Lyotard 1984; Peet 1998, 208; see also Foucault 1970).

### ***Place as Experience***

A third way of studying place, drawn on in this dissertation, focuses on how people connect to their surroundings in terms of experience and meaning. These ‘humanist’ geographers, as they are sometimes called (Relph 1976; Tuan 1976; Ley and Samuels 1978), see place as a special type of human experience that gathers and centers human intentions, meanings, and actions spatially, culturally, and environmentally. Although location, material attributes, and social forces may shape a particular place, the most important aspect is the intentions of the person with his/her world; place becomes crucial because it concentrates intentions spatially and emotionally. There are different kinds and intensities of place experience that the researcher examines, and the questions of interest are humanistic questions that focus on qualities that make us most human—issues of meaning, affection, attachment, identity, loss, imagination, and so forth. Existential phenomenology is the most common underlying philosophy used implicitly or explicitly in these studies. Relph’s work on place identity and placelessness (1976), Tuan’s research on the love of place (1974) and places of fear (1980), and Seamon’s concept of place ballets (1980) are all examples of place studies in this style of geographical research. Because the phenomenological approach is the conceptual core of the present study, I provide a more thorough overview in the next several sections of this chapter.

## The Phenomenological Approach To Place

Presently, most human geographers interested in place ground their research in one of the three conceptual approaches above outlined by Cresswell. Ultimately, there is no absolute ‘best philosophy’ of place, since each of the three conceptual approaches reveals and understands the world in different ways. Some researchers or research projects may incorporate more than one approach. Because these conceptualizations of place have contradictory philosophies, however, researchers can logically ground specific questions in only one of them at a time. Thus, it is essential to match a researcher’s own philosophical proclivities and particular research questions with the most appropriate way of approaching the subject matter.

In the present discussion, these conceptual delineations become useful for understanding the general state of place research in the discipline and also help to situate my own research within the wider study of place. This research project seeks to explore place as a lived connection by investigating place identities, attachments, meanings, and senses of place. Because of this emphasis on the experience of Wonder Valley, I have utilized a phenomenological approach to provide a structure for inquiry and a language to express results that stay as close to the lived experience of place as possible—What Wonder Valley means to the people of Wonder Valley as they experience Wonder Valley, and what my findings mean for the general human experience of living in the transitional place of an existential ecotone.

Most broadly, phenomenology is the interpretive study of human experience, seeking to describe experiences as human beings experience those experiences. Because phenomenology rejects *a priori* models and structures, it “bids us to turn toward phenomena that had been blocked from sight by the theoretical pattern in front of them” (Speigelberg 1971, 658). Anything that a person can experience is a legitimate topic for phenomenological research. The goal is to examine



and clarify these human experiences "as they spontaneously occur in the course of daily life (von Eckartsberg, 1998, 3) and present a "description of human life as it is lived and reflected upon in all of its first-person concreteness, urgency, and ambiguity" (Pollio et al. 1997, 5). Spiegelberg writes, "Phenomenology begins in silence. Only he[sic] who has experienced genuine perplexity and frustration in the face of the phenomena when trying to find the proper description for them knows what phenomenological seeing really means" (1971, 672).

Although ideographic descriptions are often an important starting point for existential phenomenology, the ultimate aim for the researcher is to use these descriptions as evidence from which to discover underlying commonalities that mark some of the essential nature of the phenomenon. Phenomenology "asks if from the variety of ways which men and women behave in and experience their everyday world there are particular patterns which transcend specific empirical contexts and point to the essential human condition" (Seamon 1979, 21).

Although phenomenology seeks a way of study that uncovers and describes these ordinary, but essential, things and experiences as we experience them, these preliminary definitions and goals of phenomenology mask the great variations of subject matter and research methods. As with all philosophical positions, each researcher interested in phenomenology brings his or her own understanding of what phenomenology is and of what a phenomenological study consists. With that being said, there are still some shared basic principles.

One basic phenomenological principle is the rejection of the subject/object dualism. The Cartesian proposal of a thinking subject separated from objects of inquiry is dismissed because it does not ultimately emanate from everyday experience. The thinking subject is replaced by a belief in the unity of the person and his/her world, and the questions of interest spring from the attributes, dynamics, and variations of this lived connection. Phenomenologists describe this

unity of being as the *lifeworld*. Seamon describes the lifeworld as “the taken-for-granted pattern and context of everyday living through which the person conducts his or her day-to-day life without having to make it an object of conscious attention” (1984, 130). Heidegger’s *Being and Time* methodically sets out an argument that human consciousness was not separate from the experienced world and refers to the lifeworld as *Dasein*, or being-in-the-world (1962, 1971).

A central phenomenological point for the present study is that the lifeworld is primarily a *place-world*, since we are always in place connected to our experiential context, but these links to the place-world are typically without conscious contemplation (Casey 1993). We are always immersed unselfconsciously in our world unless there is a dramatic and abrupt change. These ruptures occasionally jar us enough to make us attentive to some of the things, people, and places we otherwise take for granted. Events such as divorce, job termination, or a debilitating injury are some of the most disturbing events in our lives, but they are also moments when we begin to realize what we took for granted. Yet, even within a rupture, our reflections are short in duration, occur within a taken-for-grantedness, and rapidly are subsumed by tackling pressuring issues at hand.

The mode of ‘attention’ in this typical unselfconscious relationship with the world is termed by phenomenologists *intentionality*—the existential bonds and relationships automatically holding the lifeworld together. Intentionality is the ‘in’ in Heidegger’s being-in-the-world. The concept of intentionality states that ‘being’ cannot ‘be’ in a void because consciousness and experience are always consciousness and experience *of something*. In this way phenomenological research does not put deterministic force behind the environment or the person, but emphasizes instead the real, irreducible, and universal nature of the connection between the two.

The unselfconscious quality of ‘being’ in the lifeworld is called the *natural attitude*: “In the natural attitude we are too much absorbed by are mundane pursuits, both practical and theoretical; we are too much absorbed by our goals, purposes, and designs, to pay attention to the *way* the world presents itself to us” (Giorgi 1970, 148, italics in original) In phenomenology, the researcher attempts to bring the natural attitude to intellectual attention through the phenomenological attitude, or *epochè*. Husserl (1960) believed that a phenomenological method that sought to go back to things themselves could help to identify the basic structures that lay behind the lifeworld.

In a phenomenological geography, the researcher views place as ‘being-in-the-world’ made manifest environmentally and spatially—as a lived center of meaning that helps shed light on the experiential bonds of people and their lifeworld. Place is “a focus where we experience the meaningful events of our existence” (Norberg-Schulz 1971, 19), and it is the work of phenomenological geographers to describe these experiences and prescribe possible ways to sustain and improve the meaningfulness of these experiences.

Through *epochè*, the researcher can examine the unselfconscious and unreflective connections people have to their world to understand better the different kinds and intensities of everyday place experience. In doing *epochè*, we can see how places are experienced as people experience them and thereby prescribe changes or preservation efforts based on empathetic connections from the inside—not abstract, distant, and overly cerebral structures of thought from the outside (Buttimer 1980). The goal is to identify the meaningful aspects of place so as to repair damaged connections and nurture positive place experiences. Place interpreted phenomenologically is a useful focus for geographical research, since it not only offers intriguing spatially-oriented problems, but also presents a workable scale for solutions. As Seamon

explains, “Place... is only one phenomenological vantage point from which to clarify the person-world relationship, but it is a crucial starting point for the human sciences, since people are physical, bodily beings who must establish and identify themselves spatially and environmentally” (1984, 131).

## **Place in Phenomenological Geography**

Marcel stated that “an individual is not distinct from his place; he is that place” (cited in Relph 1976, 38). Because place presents an essential tie between person and world the study of place has been an essential part of academic geography (Pollio et al. 1997, 5) writes, for example, that “Geographical science has in fact a phenomenological basis; that it is to say, it derives from geographical consciousness...geographers and geography exist only in a society with a geographical sense” (1997, 21). In a similar way, Relph explains that “Place has often been identified implicitly as the essential feature of the phenomenological foundations of geography” (1976, 5). The study of place as an experiential phenomenon and as an essential part of geographic knowledge did not, however, gain ground in the discipline until the growth of humanistic geography in the early 1970s.

The first explicit discussion of an existential phenomenological approach towards place in the discipline was in a *Canadian Geographer* article by Relph (1970), who drew on insights from existential phenomenology to emphasize that all knowledge arises from the world of experience, especially the everyday understanding of the everyday geographical world (Seamon 2000). Relph continued probing the phenomenological nature of place and later published *Place and Placelessness* (1976) a book based on his dissertation research and widely considered a seminal work in phenomenological geography (Seamon 1996; Peet 1998; Cresswell 2004). His

discussion of place identity in this work is especially important to my research and will be discussed more fully later in this chapter.

Relph's early work was followed by other geographers exploring the theoretical possibilities that phenomenology and humanism in general had for place research. Tuan published numerous articles on environmental experience, but *Topophilia* (1974)—an investigation of variations in attachment to place—and *Space and Place* (1977)—an exploration of experiential space and the physical and cultural variations of the experience of place—are his best known accounts of the possibilities in researching place from an experiential perspective. In much of his work, Tuan blends Western and Eastern examples to compare place experiences based upon human traits and cultural proclivities. To Tuan, place experience is a conduit to penetrate the everyday aspects of our humanity.

In the article "Dynamism of the Lifeworld," Buttimer (1976) asked if dwelling was a noun or a verb. Buttimer believed that the traditional work on place emphasized the perspective of outsider and interpreted dwelling and place as nouns, as objects to be mapped, with the researcher taking "the role of detached observer encouraged by conventional definitions of scientific method to take a so-called 'objective' stance on the data which he perceives" (1976, 150). The scientific-minded human geographer "is therefore inevitably drawn toward finding in places what he or she intends to find in them" (Buttimer 1980, 171). Instead, Buttimer believed that dwelling is a verb—a mode of positive connection between a person and his or her world. Further, she argued that actual places should foster this meaningful experience. Places should be understood as outgrowths of the need to find our place in the world; by focusing on the study and development of positive place experience, we might build better places. She believed that using phenomenological concepts such as lifeworld could open up new avenues to understanding

places as they are experienced. She stressed turning away from the objectification of places, and focusing on sense of place, place identity, and social space.

Seamon's early work focused on everyday movement in space and its relationship to meaningful geographical experience. He argued that everyday environmental experiences could be best described as a triad of movement, rest, and encounter (1979). He suggested that the study of the components and interplay of this triad in actual places could help to understand and then lead to the creation of more meaningful places. Seamon described this triad in some instances as performing in harmony as a 'place ballet' (1980). These place ballets consist of a group of people over periods of time moving, resting, and encountering each other unselfconsciously in rhythmic patterns creating a harmonious and positive space for interaction. Seamon believed that architects and geographers might rely on insider place experiences instead of objective accounts of place to try to foster this activity.

These works and others from the late 1970s and early 1980s were followed by further place explorations in the late 1980s and early 1990s that stressed humanistic themes and examinations of insider experiences. Entrikin (1991) stressed the need for insider narratives in his exploration of how place's essence lies in between objective and subjective understanding. Entrikin argued for a humanistic approach "seeking to capture the holistic quality of the experience of place" and to "understand that experience through the eyes of the insider" (1991, 20). In a similar way Stephen Daniels argued that, "the meaning of a place is inseparable from the consciousness of those who inhabit it" (1985, 151).

These authors set the foundation for a humanistic geography of place offering radical critiques of scientism and quantitative domination, arguing that geographical studies should incorporate a focus on the experience of meaningful places as a supplement to objectivist

calculations of quantified space. These humanistic thinkers urged geographers to shift their attention from a more tangible morphological description of place to a focus on the everyday lived geographical qualities—place meaning, attachment, loss, fear, love, and so forth.

In the 1990s, the competing philosophical conceptions of social and critical geographies, including Marxism and feminism, not only bolstered the case against objectivist science, but these structure-oriented philosophies also launched salvos against agent-focused humanism and phenomenological research. After a decade of attacks from the left, the nearing of the millennium saw a great increase in the philosophical development of the phenomenological theories of place. Unlike the 1970s and 1980s, which witnessed contrasting humanistic ideals of place with positivistic science, recent humanistic works viewed the reification of social structure and postmodern chaos as the biggest threat to understanding the experiential nature of place. For example, Sack wrote that “privileging the social in modern geography, and especially in the reductionist sense that ‘everything is socially constructed,’ does as much disservice to geographical analysis as a whole as has privileging the natural in the days of environmental determinism” (1997, 2). He continued, “place’s role in the human world runs a lot deeper than that—it is a force that cannot be reduced to the social, the natural or the cultural. It is, rather, a phenomenon that brings these worlds together and, indeed, in part produced them” (1997, 3).

In a similar vein, the central argument for much of Casey’s work (1993, 1996) focused on the argument of place’s existential primacy in regards to spatial and social analysis. He echoed Heidegger’s argument that being cannot exist without its directedness towards something, and for Casey that something is place because “to be is to be in place” (1993, 16). Casey argued that place is a foundational structure of human experience: “place, by virtue of its unencompassability by anything other than itself, is at once the limit and the condition of all that exists” (1993, 15). In

other words, there can be no being and thus no spatial or social concept until there is emplacement, since “place serves as the condition of all existing things” (1993, 15). Malpas reiterates this centrality of place existentially by stating that “The idea of place encompasses both the idea of the social activities and institutions that are expressed in and through the structure of a particular place” (1999, 36) and that “the social does not exist prior to place nor is it given expression except in and through place...it is within the structure of place that the very possibility of the social arises” (1999, 36). In summation, the theoretical works of Casey and Malpas argue for the primacy of place and the importance of understanding it existentially.

It was Edward Relph’s *Place and Placelessness* (1976), however, that explicitly approached the phenomenological nature of place by describing human identities *with* and *of* place. The following section reviews Relph’s conceptualization of place and identity in considerable detail, since Relph’s concepts play a central role in the following interpretation of Wonder Valley.

## **Relph’s Interpretation of Identity and Place**

A central reason for Relph’s exhaustive study of place is his belief that such understanding might contribute to the maintenance and restoration of existing places and provide needed guidance in the making of positive place experiences (Relph 1981, 1993). This aim is an example of the constructive purpose behind phenomenological work. Since phenomenological efforts are all focused on our humanity it is almost impossible for the phenomenological researcher not to find and attempt to maintain positive experiences while working to discover and transform destructive phenomenon. Without a thorough understanding of place as it has human significance, one would find it difficult to describe why a particular place is special and



equally difficult to know how to repair existing places in need of mending. In short, before we can properly prescribe, we must first learn how to accurately describe—a central aim of phenomenological research.

If places are to be more thoroughly understood, we need a language whereby we can begin to identify enduring place identities and discuss particular place experiences. Although Relph's book contributes to the idea of loss of authenticity and meaning in a globalized consumer culture—what he describes as *placelessness*—Relph's phenomenological examination is a fundamental work because he developed a conceptual framework and a language in which we can approach the lived dimensions of place and begin to explore the identities of places and our experiences with them.

Relph described the holistic nature of place as the combination of the identity *of* place (a place's character) and identity *with* place (intensity of a person or group's lived relationship with place)—“everywhere, wherever, and however we are related to beings of every kind, identity makes its claim upon us” (1976, 42). Identity *with* place is our fundamental relationship with the world around us. There are varying modes of connection we have to the places of our world, some are comforting where we find ourselves at home and develop a feeling of insideness, others are frightening and we experience them as outsiders, and yet other times we may not attend to the place in a meaningful way and a sense of placelessness overtakes our experience. These identities with place and the varying modes of connection to places will be discussed more thoroughly later in the section.

By the identity *of* a place, Relph refers to its “persistent sameness and unity, which allows it to be differentiated from others” (Relph 1976, 45). Relph describes this persistent identity in terms of three components: (1) the place's physical setting; (2) its activities, situations,

and events; and (3) the individual and group meanings generated through people's experiences and intentions in regard to that place.

A place's *setting* refers to the physical dimensions of place—both natural features and human additions—that gives a place its material form—buildings, streets, fields, mountains, rivers, and so on. *Activities* are the general behaviors, actions, events, situations, and pace of life that make up a certain place. *Meaning* is what the landscape, activities, and other qualities of place signify personally and commonly to people associated with the places; these significances can range in intensity (positive/negative) and kind (farm town, beach community, and so forth):

Objects and features of the world are experienced in their meaning and they cannot be separated from those meanings: [t]he meanings of places may be rooted in the physical setting and objects and activities, but they are not a property of them—rather they are a property of human intentions and experiences. Relph 1976, 48.

In other words, for every, setting and activity, there are bound to be numerous meanings attached by people experiencing the same place in different ways because of different experiential circumstances. The three cannot be experienced singly, however, because they are experienced in the fullness of their combinations: “all of these dialectics are interrelated in a place, and it is their fusion that constitutes the identity of that place” (1976, 48).

This rudimentary outline is complicated, however, by the social aspect of shared identities of place. Since each person is unique and there are innumerable variations of setting, activities, and meanings, it would seem that there are infinite identities of place. These identities, however, are not all idiosyncratic because individual images and identities of places “are constantly being socialized through the use of common language, symbols, and experiences” (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Relph 1976, 57).

Through self-conscious portrayals and mass imagery, the community normalizes place identity. Just as each individual is unique and we find common groupings of people, places, although unique, are grouped also by their general common assemblages of setting, activities, and meaning. People can talk about Des Moines, Davenport, and Peoria, which can also be identified as American, Midwestern, or urban places. One of the tasks of the geographer is to find similarity in differences, and geographers have undertaken countless research projects that describe the existence and attributes of rural places, urban places, borderland communities, resort towns, mountain towns and many other place types. In other words, geographers regularly find common identity in different places so that we can learn more about humanity and our relationship with the earth as a home.

Although Relph's delineation of the identity *of* place was a major contribution to geographic understanding, the majority of his book was dedicated to how one's identity *with* place was at the crux of place experience. Relph developed an insideness/outsideness continuum to describe the everyday relationships people have with place. Relph argued that the existential relationship between insideness and its experiential opposite, outsideness, is a fundamental dialectic in human experience. Through different degrees of insidenss and outsideness, different places take on different meanings for different individuals and groups (see Table 1.1).

For Relph, *existential insideness* acts as the foundation of the place concept because, in this mode of experience, place is experienced without any self-conscious attention yet is laden with significances that are unstated and unnoticed unless the place is changed in some way—for example, one's home and community are destroyed by natural disaster. In contrast, *objective insideness* is the distancing approach taken by social scientists operating under Cartesian and scientific methodology where place is a noun, a thing, something that can be observed and

understood separately from the researcher. This mode of division between place and researcher is very much different experientially from *empathetic insideness*, an effort through which the phenomenologist attempts to enter sympathetically into the place and its people, as they understand the place. The other modes of insideness and outsideness Relph identifies are summarized in Table 1.1.

<b>IDENTITIES WITH PLACE</b>	
<b>1. Existential insideness</b>	Feeling of attachment and at-homeness. One feels this is the place where he or she belongs. The deepest kind of place experience and the one toward which we probably all yearn.
<b>2. Existential outsideness</b>	The person feels separate from or out of place. Place may feel alienating, unreal, unpleasant, or oppressive. Homelessness or homesickness would be examples. Often, today, the physical and designed environments contribute to this kind of experience.
<b>3. Objective outsideness</b>	A situation involving a deliberate dispassionate attitude of separation from place. Place is a thing to be studied and manipulated as an object. A scientific approach to place and, ironically, the approach most often taken by planners, designers, and policy makers.
<b>4. Incidental outsideness</b>	Place is the background or mere setting for activities—e.g., the landscapes and places one drives through as he or she is on the way to somewhere else.
<b>5. Behavioral insideness</b>	The deliberate attending to the appearance of place. Place is seen as a set of objects, views, or activities. For example, the experience one passes through when becoming familiar with a new place—figuring out what is where and how the various landmarks, paths, and so forth all fit together to make one complete place.
<b>6. Empathetic insideness</b>	The person, as outsider, tries to be open to place and understand it more deeply. This kind of experience requires interest, empathy, and heartfelt concern. Empathetic insideness is an important aspect of approaching a place phenomenologically.
<b>7. Vicarious insideness</b>	Deeply-felt secondhand involvement with place. One is transported to place through imagination—through paintings, novels, music, films, or other creative media.

**Table 1.1 Identities with place, according to Relph 1976 pp.47-59; table adapted from Seamon and Sowers 2008.**

## **Phenomenology of Place: Relevant Case Studies**

A perception exists with some geographers that the phenomenological perspective involves only critique (Pickles 1985, Peet 1998), abstract theory (Cresswell 2004, Wiley 2007), is anachronistic (Harvey 1996, McHugh 1996), masculinist (hooks, 1990, Rose 1993), or has been supplanted by structural and critical theories since the early 1980s (Peet 1998). In addition, Cresswell notes a lack of real-life case studies “Because they [phenomenologists] are talking about place in general it is hard to use specific examples to make the case...they tend to use imagined and idealized examples or ‘thought experiments’” (2004, 32).

Yet in spite of these various criticisms, empirical case studies on place implicitly or explicitly using a phenomenological perspective continue to be conducted. The past two decades have seen a great deal of empirical work in many important and intriguing aspects of the lifeworld. Buttner saw these empirical projects as essential but just the beginning: “A more experientially grounded humanistic orientation within the discipline depends on much more empirical investigation” (1976, 290).

Research focusing on the natural environment and dwelling is the basis of many recent phenomenological case studies. Hufford (1986) explored the special qualities of wilderness space, while Chaffin (1989) described how a river in Louisiana integrates a community together physically and experientially. Lane (1998) examined writers’ close connections to extreme mountain and desert environments and demonstrates how the harshest landscapes can be therapeutic. Nogué i Font (1993) interviewed five different groups of residents in the Garrotxa landscape of Catalonia to find how the experiential landscape of the physical environment unified differences; and Quinney (1991) linked Eastern philosophy and country music as a means to describe rural places in Northern Illinois.

Although the existential attributes of sacred place were first discussed phenomenologically by Eliade (1961), empirical work by Brenneman and Brenneman (1995) expanded the dichotomy of sacred and profane to include the loric qualities of places in a study of Irish sacred wells. In turn, Hester (1993) highlighted the importance of discovering and maintaining the everyday sacred spaces of a community to maintaining healthy small towns. Research by Marcus (1993) and Alexander (1985, 2004) discussed ways to create meaningful places for people by first identifying their needs and specific circumstances, while Porteous (1989) examined how a disregard for people's needs led to the destruction of place. Yet again, Million (1993) explored the feelings of loss that go with being physically forced from one's home.

Drawing on philosopher Merleau Ponty's focus on the body's role in place experience, Margadant-van Archen (1990) explored 8-to-12-year-old children's nature experiences, while Boschetti (1990) and McHugh and Mings (1996) investigated variations in elderly persons' experience of place. Hill (1985) presented a phenomenology of sightlessness, while Toombs wrote extensively on the lived experiences of those with chronic illness (1992, 1992a, 1995, 1995a). Technology is increasingly becoming a part of the everyday experiences of place, and Schonhammer's (1989) work demonstrated how people could voluntarily become disengaged from their world through portable audio devices.

Attachment to places that are unappealing to outsiders because of economic decline or apparent abandonment have been the focus of study by Marsh (1985) with his exploration of declining Pennsylvania coal towns, de Wit's (1994) forays into small towns in Western Kansas, and Pocius' (1991) investigation of the changing attachments to place in a declining fishing village in Newfoundland.

Dwelling is not only a home but also a deep feeling of connection and comfortableness, and this experience can occur in public as well as private places. Oldenburg's *Great Good Place* (1989) examined what he calls 'third places'—social spaces of gathering outside home and work—for example, taverns and cafes. Seamon and Nordin (1980) describe the time-space routines in the repetitions of daily movements and encounters in a Swedish marketplace place ballet. Violich (1985, 1998) focused on the sense of place in the public areas of four Dalmatian towns, Sherry (1990) conducts an analysis of a Midwestern American flea market, and Masucci (1992) examines how the Chesapeake Bay Bridge became a symbol for Maryland's Eastern Shore.

## **Research Goals**

The empirical accounts highlighted above suggest the prospects for using phenomenological insights in research focusing on specific real-world places. My study of Wonder Valley touches on many of these themes—e.g., the importance of the physical landscape for dwelling, the creation and potential destruction of place, the role of age and disability in place experience, special qualities of public places, sacred and profane zones of place, and enduring connections to places in decline. We shall find, however, that the major theme that defines the experience of Wonder Valley is that of an existential ecotone—an obvious overlapping of different worlds that usually do not occupy the same place at the same time.

In moving toward a thorough understanding of what living in an ecotone means for the residents and for the future of Wonder Valley, I work to understand the community's historical development and its current experiential dynamics as a place. In broader terms, my aim is an examination of an existential ecotone through the lens of phenomenology. As summarized in Table 1.2, these general aims can be identified more precisely in terms of the following five

research goals that give purpose and foundation to the empirical and analytical chapters of the document.

The person-environment dynamic is an inherently complex, evolving, and multi-dimensioned system. Anticipated advancement through this conceptual and empirical quagmire will eventually fall short of a holistic and precise understanding, but the results from such a study may illuminate previously overlooked existential, cultural, landscape, and spatial qualities. Any new realizations can eventually lead to a better evaluation of environmental problems and thus create better places for humankind to not only live in, but to live in well. This effort is necessary because, to properly prescribe preservation efforts or improvements to a place, we first need to adequately describe the essential nature of that place. My research goals will focus attention on the essential person-environment relationship of Wonder Valley—specifically place experiences and place identity. The following chapter describes the methodological structure and specific techniques that I employed during this research to reach my research goals.

## **RESEARCH GOALS**

- (1) Establish the origins of Wonder Valley.**
- (2) Clarify the different groups living in Wonder Valley.**
- (3) Describe the place identity created by each group by determining:**
  - a. What sort of landscape they create and why.**
  - b. What common activities they encourage or discourage and why.**
  - c. What associated meanings they ascribe to the spaces and places under their control.**
- (4) Locate spaces and places where the different groups interact, and describe the significance of the interaction.**
- (5) Describe how the community of Wonder Valley exhibits a tacit order amid what may seem like chaos.**



## CHAPTER 2 - Probing Wonder Valley's Place Identity



## **A Bridge Chapter**

This chapter has two objectives. First, I define a systematic methodology that focuses on bringing better understanding as to what it means to live in Wonder Valley. Second, I introduce findings resulting from my preliminary investigation of Wonder Valley's group identities. This chapter and these initial findings serve as a bridge connecting the theoretical questions from the previous chapter with the in-depth empirical investigation presented in Chapters 3-7.

This bridge chapter is comprised of three sections, the first of which justifies the use of a phenomenological methodology and outlines the goals of empirical phenomenological research. The second section reviews two central aspects of phenomenology—*seeing anew* and *empathizing with the phenomenon*. These two themes are fleshed out philosophically and empirically and then discussed as to their implementation in the present study. The third and last section reviews the primary research design, discussing my three major methodological approaches for understanding Wonder Valley: (1) first-person explication, (2) analysis of Wonder Valley texts; and (3) interviews of Wonder Valley residents. This final section also sketches out in preliminary fashion the community's three central identity groups—*homesteaders*, *dystopics*, and *utopics*—and thus works as a preview for the empirical Chapters 3 through 7.

## **Phenomenological Methods**

The purpose of any phenomenological study is to concentrate on a distinct phenomenon, particularly in terms of broader underlying patterns and structures. Seamon contends that this purpose is actualized by “an openness and empathy whereby we begin to sense the other's situation and meaning” (1990, 158). He sets out three axioms that a phenomenological study

must involve: first, a curiosity or desire to know the phenomenon but rejecting *a priori* theories and assumptions regarding its nature; second, direct and empathetic contact with the phenomenon; and third, a selection of specific research methods that can accurately portray human experience of the phenomenon in experiential terms (ibid). The first two axioms presuppose an openness and nearness to the phenomena that my study holds as essential, while the third suggests the necessity of specific research methods. In regard to this last axiom, Cohen (2001) has written extensively on the importance of articulating the design and strategy prior to a phenomenological study for profitable results. It is therefore important that I determine what research methods should be used in my study and why.

Psychologist and philosopher William James (1911, 1912) proposed that “the only things that shall be debatable among philosophers shall be things definable in terms drawn from experience” and that a *radical empiricism* is needed to approach these experiences and phenomena. Philosopher John Dewey (1925) echoed James’ call for the experiential unification of the objectivity/subjectivity and mind/body dualisms but named his approach *immediate empiricism*. Both thinkers emphasized that studies are flawed if they present only an objective level of measurement and divide real experience into *a priori* dualisms. Such a reductionist parsing, they believed, fails to explain how meaning, values, and intentionality arise, influence, and interact with a person or group’s everyday life. The essence of James’ and Dewey’s argument is that people and their worlds are intimately connected and that this connection is vital to a better understanding of human experience. Further, both thinkers contended that radical/immediate empiricism affords researchers a means to study this intimate lived connectedness.

This radical/immediate empiricism can be equated to the *phenomenological reduction*, the purpose of which is to bring a particular phenomenon to directed and sympathetic attention (Spiegelberg 1981). Holstein (1994) asserts that this method is not a positivistic endeavor and that the empathy inherent in such a study offers one of the best means for identifying and describing the everyday experiences that order our world. Schultz extends this point by stating “The safeguarding of the subjective point of view is the only but sufficient guarantee that the world of social reality will not be replaced by a fictional non-existing world constructed by the scientific observer” (1964, 8).

The question arises as to how the researcher knows if this type of research is done correctly so that the results are accurate and thus trustworthy. Polkinghorne (1983) describes four qualities to judge the trustworthiness of a phenomenological project: first, *vividness*—the author’s ability to draw the reader in with a lively and honest account; second, *accuracy*—the author demonstrates a truthful account as understood by those who experience the phenomenon; third, *richness*—the author presents an aesthetically rich portrayal of the phenomenon; and finally, *elegance*—the author’s work effectively describes the phenomenon in a graceful manner that stays close to the phenomenon’s essence.

In discussing these four qualities, Polkinghorne (1983) insists that the issue is no longer the precision of objective measurement but, rather, the power to convince readers of the phenomena’s importance and to involve readers so that they may compare it to their own experience. This process helps us to recognize what phenomena are shared and why, how they can be experienced in differing ways, and further reveals the complex layering of meanings that constitutes particular lifeworlds.

Giorgi (1975, 96) explains that “the chief point to be remembered with this kind of research is not so much whether another position [towards the subject matter] could be adopted (this point is granted beforehand) but whether a reader, adopting the same viewpoints as articulated by the researcher, can also see what the researcher saw, whether or not he [*sic*] agrees with it. That is the key criterion for [phenomenological] research.” In other words, the power to draw in and convince the reader of the phenomenological study’s vividness, accuracy, richness, and elegance must be an essential aim of the research design.

Seamon (1990) argues that this power to convince hinges upon *intersubjective corroboration*. In other words, the phenomenologist’s interpretations are no more and no less than interpretive possibilities. Does the description of the experience ring true for those who know the specific phenomena in their own life or learn about it secondhand from phenomenological description? Seamon (1990, 161) explains:

Ultimately, the most significant test of trustworthiness for any phenomenological study is its relative power to draw the reader into the researcher’s discoveries, allowing the reader to see his or her own world or the worlds of others in a new, deeper way. The best phenomenological work breaks people free from their usual recognitions and moves them along new paths of understanding.

Churchill (1998) reiterates the importance of firsthand recognition and understanding when he stresses that, although there will be common themes when more than one phenomenological researcher studies the same phenomenon; there will also be some differences in emphases. So even though a “somewhat coherent set of themes can be gleaned from...different interpretive research results” (1998, 81), these differences among interpretations do not indicate the failure of phenomenology as a method but, instead, demonstrate the fact that human interpretation is always only partial. A phenomenological interpretation does not give

someone the whole story but can provide one accurate account of the phenomenon. Moreover, Churchill's study highlights that, typically in phenomenological research, the number of participants is not the central concern, the important thing is to get close to the phenomena and its essential nature. If the researcher does this, then any number of participants is considered sufficient, from one to many.

My research design encompasses the above elements of a phenomenological reduction—explicit research design; nearness to the phenomenon; wanting to know more about it in its own terms; and the need to convince others through vividness, accuracy, richness, and elegance. In broadest terms, however, the essential elements of a phenomenological research design can be spoken of in terms of two overarching concerns: first, *attempting to see the phenomenon anew*; and, second, *empathizing with the phenomenon*. In the next sections, I discuss these two themes, drawing on theoretical and empirical works as research examples.

### ***Seeing Anew***

It is a given that a researcher needs some sort of contact with, or at least a preconception of, a phenomenon so that he or she will be enticed to know more about its nature. It is essential, however, that once the study begins, the phenomenological researcher focuses on knowing the phenomenon as it is and does not rely or embellish upon what he or she assumes the phenomenon to be. Although a great deal of local knowledge can be helpful in guiding a researcher's first steps (for example, informal comments from local informers), such knowledge can also complicate the study if the researcher fails to take into account relevant experiences that are still unknown within the researcher's own pre-study experience. To remedy this error and understand the phenomenon more completely, the phenomenological researcher needs to

separate from the natural attitude—one's taken-for-granted understanding of the world—and reflexively address the full range of experiences that constitutes the phenomenon.

Holstein (1994) explains that there always needs to be some familiarity with the phenomenon to begin a study—a natural recognition of some quality that peaks curiosity and elicits further questions. Having a great deal of pre-scientific experience with the phenomenon can allow the researcher to be a valuable first-person source in the study, but it can also be problematic for a researcher who forgets to “bracket the life world, that is, setting aside one's taken-for-granted orientation” (263). The researcher must recognize that he or she has dual intentionalities, the first of which is a pre-study identity with the phenomenon, which in my research is my personal lifeworld experience of Wonder Valley. As Relph explained, the prior identity of the researcher with a place can range from extreme outsidership to existential insidership with several modes somewhere in between (Table 1.1). The researcher's other identity is that of the phenomenologist, which, as Relph contends, necessitates the perspective of an empathic-insider (Table 1.1). In any phenomenological study, the researcher's intentionalities overlap—just as the researcher takes an empathetic role towards the experience of a place, he or she can also carefully analyze and create narratives of a ‘pre-study’ and ‘during-the-study’ connection to the phenomenon. The existence of the phenomenological connection, however, cannot exist without first seeing the phenomenon anew.

‘Seeing anew’ is a two-step process. First, it involves an *interruption* of our everyday routines and understandings—a stepping out of the natural attitude. In our everyday lives, such a disruption is usually felt as a negative experience shaking our illusion of stability and permanence. Examples of this existential rupture can be small daily happenings such as road construction blocking our normal route to work, or much larger life-changing events like a

natural disaster destroying our hometown. In any event, before we can see anew, our taken-for-granted way of doing things needs to be interrupted. In everyday life, these interruptions are by definition unexpected and short lived. The phenomenological attitude differs from the natural attitude, however, in that the phenomenologist induces the disruption and sustains it for an extended period of time. These interruptions are necessary to provoke a positive and productive end—a clearer and deeper understanding of the phenomenon as it is in itself.

Interruption of the everyday world, however, does not equate to actually understanding the phenomenon, and this fact points to the second important stage of seeing anew: *refocusing*. Spiegelberg (1982) notes that refocusing “helps us get at the world that exists prior to our conceptualizing it” (680) by investigating particular phenomena with as few preconceived notions as possible and “giving the phenomena a fuller and fairer hearing than traditional empiricism has accorded them” (682). This process enlarges and deepens the range of our experiences with the phenomenon. In short, seeing anew involves two interrelated stages: first, the researcher draws away from the taken-for-granted nature of the lifeworld through *interruption*; second, through *refocusing*, the researcher opens his or her eyes to the multiplicity of possibilities affording the best chance to more fully understand the phenomenon.

Goethe, for example, was best known for his early 19th century plays and poetry, but he also conducted scientific studies on color and plants (Seamon and Zajonc 1998). Although Goethe was well acquainted with both the colors and plants that surrounded his everyday life, he turned away from his everyday acceptance and preconceptions of each and applied an empathetic rigor questioning their true essence. He felt that the scientific method born out of the Age of Enlightenment and Newtonian science lacked a deeper connection to the essence of a phenomenon and that hypotheses “[a]re lullabies with which the teacher soothes his pupils to



sleep” (Amrine 1998, 36). Instead we should “[s]earch nothing beyond the phenomena, they themselves are the theory” (Matthaei 1971, 76). He strove to remove all presumptions and remained severely self-critical at every stage of investigation, trusting in his experience with the phenomenon. His findings were an early phenomenology of the natural world as he rejected the Newtonian theories of color as fixed and instead emphasized the fluidity of experience and the balancing of tensions inherent in color, plants, and in life.

In his essay, “Traveler on country roads,” Richard Quinney (1991) revisits the rural northern Illinois landscape where he was raised. He spent the first two decades of his life in this agricultural landscape and remembered it as a simple place. He associated many of his boyhood memories with the geometric maze of roads nestled between the expansive fields of corn and soybeans. Yet, when this middle-aged rural expatriate returned to his home region, he found it eerily similar to the way it looked when left it, but upon further reflection also quite different. The landscape looked the same at first, but since, for him, there was a lack of past experiential connections, the place *felt* different. This disturbance of the taken-for-granted led him to refocus not only upon the nature of his country roads but also country roads in general. Although he had traveled the roads countless times in the past, by refocusing, he discovered the inherent complexity and paradox of being connected to a landscape dedicated to movement.

For both Goethe and Quinney, the researcher first turned away from his taken-for-granted experience with a phenomenon, either purposefully or serendipitously, and then refocused on the broader essence of the phenomenon. In terms of my study on the experience of Wonder Valley, I was required to first turn away from my unquestioned, taken-for-granted relationship with the place. To make this shift, I needed to understand what exactly my relationship with Wonder

Valley was, and then to purposefully interrupt this connection and refocus on the place as an empathetic researcher concerned with the broader lived nature of Wonder Valley.

I first encountered Wonder Valley when I was a senior in High School. I went there to visit my grandparents and to experience the strange, exciting landscape of the rural desert West. From the beginning, I knew I would feel at home in this alien landscape because my grandparents and their cabin would provide a mooring point. At the same time, I would also be able to indulge my curiosity with the exotic surroundings. My first visit was a chance to reconcile my suppositions with actual experiences. After my second, third, fourth, and fifth two-week visits, however, I began to create predictable pathways and destinations, taking many of the places I had experienced for granted and straying fewer times from now-familiar roads, trails, hills, and homes.

My parents divorced when I was three and although I lived with my mother most of the time, I was constantly moving between my father's apartment in California, and my mother's apartment and maternal grandparent's farm in Illinois. The result was that much of my early life involved movement, displacement, and resettlement. Because of or in spite of this perpetual relocation, I developed the ability to connect to places quickly. I established roots easily and was able to return to familiar places with a feeling of at-homeness that most people would have for a house they had lived in for many years. It was no surprise, therefore, that in a short period of time I felt at home in my grandparent's cabin and in Wonder Valley.

I knew approximately the same number of people in Wonder Valley as I knew in my hometown in Illinois. In Wonder Valley's desert landscape, however, I was able to see most of the place in a 360-degree vantage point from my grandparent's cabin. I also began to move around the cabin and other familiar locales in a more unselfconscious manner—for example, I

was able to disregard sounds that would normally frighten (the howl of a coyote) or become alert to sounds that would normally seem innocuous (a nearby automobile engine); I would check for scorpions in my shoes before a hike or under my blankets before I went to sleep; I easily made all the correct turns to my uncle's cabin over a mile away through the maze of creosote; I instinctively knew when to return home from a hike or an off-road vehicle ride before the sun set; and I began to recognize the identity of many residents just by the sound of their vehicle.

Wonder Valley became less of a vacation locale for me than a well-known place with familiar landscapes, activities, and people. I certainly did not know every part of the expansive 180 square miles of the valley. Instead, I felt that Wonder Valley was a shifting range of actions and meanings that over time had developed into a multi-tiered experiential space. There was a core home area centered on my grandparent's cabin and the neighboring properties owned by relatives, friends, or acquaintances. Immediately adjoining are familiar pathways extending outwards from the core on which I hiked and rode off-road vehicles. Beyond the core and these many pathways was an outer sphere in which I could not orient myself precisely but did not feel exactly lost. This multi-tiered existential/spatial pattern of Wonder Valley is in some ways similar to all other places in which I have felt at home; it is, however, different in its expansiveness and the likelihood of unfamiliar spaces being hostile places.

Regardless (or perhaps, because) of the danger of hostilities from both animals and people outside the familiar places and pathways of Wonder Valley, I came to feel a deep attachment to this place—a feeling of at-homeness. The question then became, “How do I take advantage of this first-person knowledge while also shifting my existential insideness towards a phenomenological attitude?” An answer to this question was to interrupt my existential

insideness with Wonder Valley and to refocus my efforts towards being an empathetic insider—a process described in the next section.

### ***Empathizing With the Phenomenon***

Empathizing with the phenomenon is the second central aspect of a phenomenological study. Empathy is generally defined as a supportive identification with and understanding of another's situation (Spiegelberg 1975). Empathy is an essential part of the phenomenological method, since it is what separates 'knowing about' from 'knowing' a phenomenon. This distinction of 'knowing about' and 'knowing' is essential to phenomenology because, without an empathetic attitude, there is no real 'knowing' but only a natural predisposition to treat the phenomenon as an object and attach external bias and *a priori* attributes (Relph 1981). In other words, empathy is the difference between intimately connecting with the lifeworld versus a distanced external observation of the thing studied.

Although the openness and understanding that empathy provides is essential in phenomenological research, empathy towards the phenomenon necessitates a desire to know the phenomenon as it is and to foster a feeling of care towards it. The desire to know the phenomenon creates a feeling of respect that then allows for a proper description of 'it' as 'it' is. As a result, care emanates from this respect, and care then sustains a legitimate position in which the researcher can suggest prescriptions to support and improve the experience of the phenomenon (Relph 1984, Tuan 1974). In other words, empathy provides a connection to the phenomenon that creates a path towards a holistic description, which is needed before a proper prescription is offered. Thus, to phenomenologists, it is empathy that is a crucial step to knowing and rehabilitating our world.

Empathy is a method of learning by listening and attempting to understand a phenomenon in its own terms in a way that, as much as possible, is free of preconceptions and inferences. Consequently, empathetic attention allows for a multiplicity of narratives—a situation that points to the potential complexity and ambiguity of the phenomenon. This attentive listening not only allows the researcher to discover others' narratives but also joins the researcher to the phenomenon. Through this connection, he or she becomes more cognizant of his or her relationship with the phenomenon. Seamon (2000, 159) states that empathy is “a way of study whereby the researcher seeks to be open to the phenomenon and to allow it to show itself in its fullness and complexity through [his or] her own direct involvement and understanding.” As we consciously direct our attention and intentions toward the phenomenon, therefore, we learn more about own taken-for-granted presumptions and relationships with it and are better able to compare and contrast our experiences with others who may be part of the phenomenon—for example, the various residents of Wonder Valley.

In terms of the phenomenon of place, Relph (1976) contends that a researcher interested in knowing a place fully as possible needs to become an empathetic insider (Table 1.1). This effort necessitates a process of attentive engagement with all our senses focused on the totality and minutia of the phenomenon in order to disclose experiential themes. In most phenomenological place studies, this engagement is done through first-person reflection or an empathetic documentation of others' involvement with the place.

One example of first-person reflection relating to place is Lin Wong's (2005) phenomenology of commuting by bicycle. Wong, a transportation researcher, investigated her daily twenty-minute commute between home and the University of Toronto. Although movement through space and time usually defines a commute, it also takes place and constitutes

a unique and meaningful phenomenon in the cyclist's lifeworld. Wong took herself out of her routine by contemplating the meaningfulness of her bicycle journey, and by doing so discovered three essential elements of the bike-riding commute. First, she identified what she calls *equipmental contexture and whole*, which relates to the cyclist-bicycle symbiosis, the surroundings and circumstances that the commute brings forth, and the potential morphing of scenery into obstacles. Second, Wong spoke of an *anticipatory stance*, illustrated by the fact that the cyclist does not simply exist or passively see but anticipates and prepares so that he or she is constantly predicting when surroundings may become life-threatening obstacles. Third, she described *meditative experience* whereby, through her bicycle journey, she becomes alert in the morning, calm after a hectic day, and more connected to the world between her home and workplace. Through this research, Wong demonstrated how empathetic attention to the parts and whole of one portion of her everyday experience generates a deeper knowledge of an overlooked but important daily part of the lifeworld.

Like Wong, Randolph Hester (1993, 2006) used an empathic perspective on place in his study of Manteo, North Carolina's 'sacred spaces'— i.e., spaces and places "consecrated by sacrifice and special treatment and endowed by a community with the power of highly revered convictions, values, and virtues." (2006, 177) Instead of relying on his own first-person narrative, however, Hester used various techniques to document residents' connections to their place. Manteo was a town with a problem that many communities have faced—attempting to increase tourism while not sacrificing the town's historical and environmental uniqueness. In assisting the town to expand economically while not losing its historical ambience, Hester, used surveys, interviews, and behavioral mapping to identify "what lifestyles and landscape features were essential for a continuation of the town's culture" (122). These methods and discoveries

helped him to understand what landscapes, activities, and associated meanings were most important for Manteo residents and why. Through Hester's research, residents and town officials realized that there were certain 'sacred spaces'—for example, the soda fountain and drug store, a statue of Sir Walter Raleigh and its surrounding park, and docks—that had emotional significance for Manteo residents. The policy and design aim then became to protect these places while, at the same time, encouraging tourism growth.

V.F. Chaffin's (1989) study of the small community Isle Brevelle, Louisiana, combined the first-person narrative of place that Wong relied upon in her research with the collection of observations, interviews, and historical texts that formed the basis of Hester's study. Unlike Wong and Hester, Chaffin's study did not emerge from his everyday experience or the need to solve a practical problem—he stumbled upon the community and found it so fascinating he wanted to know more about it.

Local officials gave him a brief introduction to the community and its history. He visited the community multiple times and was repeatedly told by residents that the local Catholic Church was the key to community cohesion. Although he approached the place in an empathetic manner and gathered experiences and stories from the locals, he felt that these narratives did not fully describe his own experience of the place. It was only after he attended a community festival that he realized a key to the community's powerful sense of place was the river that ran through the middle of Isle Brevelle. This river was both a physical and existential tie that bound the residents to each other, to their place, and their past. He then canoed and swam the river, an experience by which he understood the river's centrality to the rhythm and ambience of Isle Brevelle. Chaffin's work demonstrates that, although creating empathetic connections to

residents may be helpful, sometimes deeper themes remain hidden because everyday routines and points of view shroud the essence of a place.

## **Approaches to Understanding Wonder Valley**

Each of the studies just reviewed demonstrates how the central phenomenological themes of *seeing anew* and *empathizing with the phenomenon* can be employed to better understand specific places and place in general. In regard to Wonder Valley, for two years, I utilized these themes by interrupting my own taken-for-granted role of existential insider and refocusing my attention towards the perspective of an empathetic insider—reflecting on my own personal connections to the place and documenting residents’ experiences and understandings of Wonder Valley. Specifically, this phenomenological study incorporated three methodological approaches: (1) first-person explication (2) analysis of Wonder Valley texts; and (3) interviewing. In the next section, I review each of these approaches in turn and then close with a concluding section that offers a preview to the following three interpretive chapters.

### ***First-person Explication***

Wong’s research on commuting validated that a phenomenological study need not involve more than the phenomenologist and his or her lived situation as a study context in which to produce useful results about the lifeworld. Although my research on Wonder Valley necessitated many more participants and types of evidence, my extensive experience with the people and place of Wonder Valley compelled me to include a first-person narrative in the research. As Chaffin’s study demonstrated, a researcher’s contact with a place and subsequent reflexive engagement can help uncover a more comprehensive portrait of a place.



Because I have over ten years worth of experience with Wonder Valley, the first task of my research was to reflect on my own experiences and conceptions of Wonder Valley's identity and sense of place. What, as I understand the place, were its important features? Who did I know and what was my relationship with them? What places did I enjoy or avoid? Over time, how have I approached the place differently and has the place changed me?

At first, I tried to approach these issues and answer these questions while away from Wonder Valley, but over time, I found it easier to contemplate these matters while I was actually there. During subsequent visits, I took photographs and kept journal entries documenting what I did each day, including daily routines. I reflected on the significance of each person, situation, and landscape of Wonder Valley that I knew. I used this same reflective practice to create a personal account as I conducted fieldwork documenting residents' experiences. While I was in the field, I constantly searched my own feelings and reviewed my changing experience with individuals, groups, the landscape, and Wonder Valley as a place. Many of these personal reflections, typical experiences, and private thoughts find their way into the following chapters to add both depth and nuance to the interpretive accounts.

### *Analysis of Wonder Valley Texts*

There is a long history of textual interpretation in phenomenological research, and it is generally divided into two basic epistemological groupings: (1) texts that are used for their *content* to support the accuracy of an account; and (2) an hermeneutical tradition that analyzes a text mainly for its *context*—what it says about the particular author's experiential and cultural situation (Mugerauer 1986, 1994). I utilized both types of analysis in the research. For example, I used primary and secondary texts, such as government reports, for accurate supporting

information on the details of Wonder Valley's founding, evolution, and current situation. I also, analyzed local artwork and the material landscape in terms of what they indicate about residents' relationship with Wonder Valley.

In analyzing content, I searched for reliable documents that could verify aspects of Wonder Valley's history and contemporary situation. Eventually, I gathered such items as maps, newspaper accounts, government reports, and Internet sites (personal websites, message boards and blogs). These documents assisted in answering questions such as: How did Wonder Valley come into existence? What sort of people moved to the community, and during what time periods? When, how, and why has the population fluctuated over time? What shifts occurred in residential landscapes over the decades? What current issues are important to residents of Wonder Valley?

I began my search for answers to these questions with the popular journal *Desert Magazine*, published in Palm Desert, California from, 1937 until 1985. During its forty-eight years of publication, this magazine focused on life in the Desert West, with many of the articles relating to California desert issues and specifically to Wonder Valley. Feature articles included topics such as detailing jackrabbit-homestead development and life in the rural Mojave Desert during Wonder Valley's early settlement period of the 1950s. Although this magazine was of value in that it set Wonder Valley into a larger regional context of popularization and privatization of Western desert lands, it did not, however, adequately piece together the specific history and meaningful events of Wonder Valley's creation and evolution. To remedy this deficiency, I changed my focus to local and regional newspaper articles.

Although Wonder Valley does not have its own newspaper, the neighboring town of Twentynine Palms has published *The Desert Trail* continuously since 1935 and occasionally has

included information about Wonder Valley. Despite the fact that *The Desert Trail* has always been the nearest newspaper press to the community, articles of Wonder Valley's formation were strangely nonexistent in its early issues. I did, however, find recent articles that discussed current events in Wonder Valley—for example; controversies about water rights, ORV restrictions, and repairing or destroying abandoned cabins. The newspaper had also established an online forum for residents to express personal views on local issues. This forum has been useful because it documents the changing circumstances and problems of the community from residents' points of view. This forum has also provided names of citizens actively engaged in Wonder Valley's current issues, and thus potential research participants.

I made use of many database search engines that locate local and national newspaper articles (for example, LexisNexis and National Newspaper Index), though I found that the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR) search engine, designed to find articles relating to baseball in national newspapers, to be especially helpful. This search engine allowed me to explore major newspapers by keyword (i.e., 'Wonder Valley', 'Small Tract Act', 'desert homesteading', 'ORV', and so forth). Moreover, once I found an article of interest, I could view it digitally and then download it as a PDF file. This search engine helped me to locate many articles of significance in Los Angeles newspapers—federal land auctions within Wonder Valley (1938-1950), the formation of the community (1950s), and contemporary issues affecting current residents, such as crime, ORV restrictions, abandoned cabins, and the influx of artists into Wonder Valley.

Fortunately, I found that federal government documents provided much needed historical evidence of the evolution of Wonder Valley's landscape and population. For example, the Small Tract Act of 1938 detailed the disposal of federal land to private citizens, and the Bureau of Land

Management's 1980 internal review described the successes and failures of the Act from its beginnings until it was repealed in 1976. The 1980 report also documents amendments to the original bill, discusses why each amendment was authorized, and lists the yearly land-purchase applications and disposed acreage of every western state. In total, the government reports not only demonstrated that Wonder Valley was the largest single region of small-tract federal land disposal; these reports also allowed me to more precisely reconstruct Wonder Valley's history.

For the hermeneutical portion of my research—investigating Wonder Valley texts in terms of the particular author's experiential perspective—I analyzed local artwork, residential landscapes, and the architecture of Wonder Valley's houses for what each of these 'texts' reveals about the author's identity *of* and *with* Wonder Valley. For decades, hermeneutical research has included the interpretation of art for the purpose of understanding the role of place in an artist's experiential/cultural context—for example, medieval tapestries (Casey 2006), Renaissance paintings (Cosgrove 1984), East Asian maps (Tuan 1974), memorial statuary (Foote 1997), and current film (Lukinbeal 2005, Seamon 2008). The point of these investigations is not to test the historical veracity or geographic accuracy of the art work, but to see what it says about the person or people who created it and the circumstances around its making.

From the beginning of Wonder Valley, a few artists had settled and set up workshops in the community. After Joshua Tree National Monument was upgraded to a National Park, however, there was a considerable increase in the number of visitors greatly increased who desired landscape paintings and sculptures depicting the region. As a result, many more artists have purchased unoccupied cabins for art studios and have made Wonder Valley their year-round or winter home. These artists, mostly from San Francisco and Los Angeles, now represent a large minority of the Wonder Valley population, and today their presence is a significant part

of the community. Because of their importance, I interviewed several of these artists and photographed their work to better understand how their lives and work shape and are shaped by Wonder Valley (Figure 2.1, 2.2).



**Figure 2.1 Sculpture on display (photograph by author, sculpture by Mark Heuston).**



**Figure 2.2 Art workshop and gallery (photograph by author).**

For decades, cultural geographers have investigated the actual built landscape as another kind of text to be read. Since the rejection of environmental determinism in the 1920s and the onset of a cultural possibilism, scholars such as Carl Sauer, J.B. Jackson, Peirce Lewis, and Terry Jordan, have understood the construction of farms, fields, folk housing, cityscapes, and other everyday landscape features as texts to be read that can offer researchers clues to a region or place's culture and identity. Within this emphasis on the cultural landscape, the interpretation of architectural forms, especially houses, continues to be an active research focus in the fields of geography, sociology, and architecture (Mugerauer 1996; Hay 2006; Edginton 2010).

In interpreting Wonder Valley as a text, I focused largely on the residential cultural landscape and the architecture of residents' homes. I sought to compile a thorough photographic record of how residents make use of their properties. To undertake this task, I drove most of Wonder Valley's dirt roads and sand trails to take photographs of any cultural features that

seemed significant and offered visual evidence to questions such as: What do some residents do with their land that others do not? Do property owners create physical boundaries around their property and, if they do, how? Do built elements on the properties fit the surrounding desert landscape, or do these elements seem misplaced? During my field excursions into and around Wonder Valley, I downloaded photographs and indexed them with descriptive and evaluative commentary. After my last trip to Wonder Valley, I scrutinized all photographs and comments as one means to identify significant commonalities, variations, and outliers of Wonder Valley's cultural landscape.

In my field excursions, I also photographed and documented the various house types that Wonder Valley residents have built or bought. I wanted to find out answers to questions like the following: Do residents build single constructions or multiple buildings? What are some common building styles? I also spoke with residents to determine, if they built their home, how they happened to choose their particular house style. If they had bought their home from first-generation Wonder Valley residents I asked if the current residents knew the history of their house and why they chose it as a home.

I found that many times certain types of houses were reflective of the way residents identified with Wonder Valley. For example, first and second-generation homesteaders created what they call 'builtmores' (See Figures 2.3, 2.4). This house type began as a twenty-foot-by-twenty foot-square wood-plank cabin with one door and one window without glass. Over time, these homeowners typically extended the structure, usually pouring a concrete floor (early cabins had dirt floors) and adding a front porch, bedroom, and bathroom after plumbing had been installed. After five decades, any original cabins that were not abandoned have typically doubled in size with some as large as 1,500 square feet and including a luxurious interior (Figure 2.5,

2.6). As I demonstrate in Chapters 3-7, the study of the appearance and contents of these houses and their surrounding landscapes was one important kind of evidence for understanding the residents' identity of, and connection to, Wonder Valley.



**Figures 2.3 and 2.4. Exterior of typical 'Builtmores' (photographs by author).**



**Figures 2.5 and 2.6 Upper-end 'Builtmore' interiors (photographs by author).**

### ***Interviewing***

Variations exist in how freely and spontaneously participants are able to contribute to the research process, ranging from participant-driven biography and oral history to the highly structured questionnaire format (Winchester 2000). The interview can be thought of as in the middle of this spectrum of freedom and spontaneity, since interviews permit the researcher to purposefully direct the discussion, while still allowing participants to add their own voice to the

research. In this sense, interviews provide a diversity of opinion, empowering the participant and revealing the complexities of behaviors and motivations (Dunn 2003).

Three major types of interview structures, each with a specific purpose and a different expectation of the participant's role in the research. The *unstructured interview* is focused on one general theme usually sensitive in nature, such as sexuality, domestic violence, or drug use (Warrington 2001; Valentine 1993; Symanski 1974). This interview type allows interviewees to tell their story; although the interviewer asks questions for clarification, his or her primary job is to listen. *Semi-structured interviews* are issue-oriented with the interviewer interested in gaining information on certain key themes, thus allowing specific questions to shift from participant to participant to better elicit these themes (Hay 2006; Scott, et al 2006). The *structured interview* is question-based, meaning that interviewers present the questions exactly as they appear on the survey, in a definite order and preferably in the same environment. The goal is to minimize variations so that the resulting information can be easily converted to numerical expression for statistical analysis (Dunn 2000).

In my research on Wonder Valley, I used a semi-structured approach, since I was more concerned about the issue of residents' identities of Wonder Valley (emergence, landscape, activities, and associated meanings) than quantifying answers to specific questions or creating individual life histories. In planning my semi-structured interviews, I utilized an interview guide that contained a few general themes and associated guiding questions. The structure of the guide was developed with two aims in mind: First, it needed to include questions to elicit information about the main components of place identity, and, second, the guide would begin with straightforward questions dealing with basic information and timelines to put the interviewee at ease and then raise more intricate issues involving social involvement and place meaning. This



format proved to be helpful in elucidating information about residents' experience of Wonder Valley (Table 2.1).

Ultimately, however, this guide did not strictly bind me, as participants could provide lengthy commentary or go off topic if they so wished. Typically, participants' elaborations and asides touched on one or more new topics of interest, at which time I could ask more specific questions relevant to my guide. During actual interviews, I also eliminated or changed certain questions that I found irrelevant. For instance, if an interviewee made it clear that he or she did not participate in activities with other Wonder Valley residents, I eliminated any questions relating to social interaction and instead emphasized questions dealing with the interviewee's individual activities. In short, I attempted to be pragmatic in the way I carried out an interview, directing the participant toward themes and questions that seemed to elucidate the most useful and intriguing information.

The interviews were conducted in person or via telephone, most lasting approximately two to three hours. There were, however, three interviews that lasted less than twenty minutes because the participant did not have time to talk, and two interviews that lasted several hours. For example, my interview with a Beverly Hills landscape designer, who restores abandoned houses in Wonder Valley, began as a telephone interview. Because he had so many useful stories and insights, however, I asked if I might finish the interview by speaking with him directly the next time he was in Wonder Valley. Later that week, to finish the interview, he invited me to one of his houses undergoing construction. Once I arrived, I was able not only to discuss Wonder Valley with him but also interviewed several of his employees remodeling the property. The interview extended into a dinner invitation and continued into the evening with all of us sitting around an outside fireplace discussing the Wonder Valley experience.

### **Sample Interview Guide for a Resident of Wonder Valley**

Before each interview, I explained to the participant that my aim as a researcher was to better understand the Wonder Valley community, and that all information from the interview (except the interviewee's name) could be used and eventually included in my dissertation. I made it known that the participant could end the interview at any time without prejudice. I provided my name and phone number and asked for each participant's name, age, and contact information. Key guiding themes and questions were as follows:

#### **Emergence**

1. Where are the participants originally from—where have they lived?
2. When did they move to Wonder Valley (WV)?
3. What led to their decision to move to WV?
4. What did they think about WV before and when they moved there?
5. Did their expectations of the place meet their early experiences, their current experience?

#### **Landscape**

6. Do they have a home in WV and, if so, do they live here full time? Do they perceive the variations in weather and extreme nature of the desert landscape to be a challenge/attraction?
7. Have they thought about living in another place during a part of the year?
8. If they live here part-time, where is/are their other residence(s) What reasons do they have for living elsewhere at certain times? What draws them back in the times they do live in WV?
9. What part of the natural landscape is their favorite/least favorite, and why?
10. What words and images come to mind when they think about the human/built landscape of WV? Can they think of a story that helps to explain their feelings toward a natural/cultural landscape they like/dislike?

#### **Activities**

11. What activities do they engage in? Do they associate with any other WV residents in doing these activities? Examples/stories of these?
12. Do they participate in the same activities today as they did when they first moved to WV?
13. Do they associate with the same friends and acquaintances who they associated with when they first came to WV? Do they stay away from any places or people, and why?
14. How have they and their friends' and acquaintances' attitudes towards the place and the people changed over time?
15. What sort of outdoor activities do they participate in? Which of these do they do most often? (daily, weekly, monthly, annually) Can they tell me about the first time they did this...the last time...a memorable time? Are there any activities that they would like to do more often?
16. Are they a member of any national or regional organizations?
17. What do they think are the important issues currently affecting WV and its residents? What are some of the issues that are currently important to them personally?
18. Do they see themselves living in WV in the future?
19. What, if any, circumstances would cause them to leave the community?

#### **Meanings**

20. What meanings do they attach to other places where they have lived? What about WV? How do these compare and contrast?
21. What are some of their favorite places outside of Wonder Valley, What meanings do they attach to these places? What meanings do they attach to some of their favorite times, places, and activities associated with WV? How are these similar and different?
22. Have their meanings of WV places and activities changed over time? Has the meaning of WV changed over time? If so, how and why?
23. Are there any other aspects of their experience of WV that they wish to share?

**Table 2.1 Interview Schedule for Wonder Valley Residents.**

In terms of the mechanics of documenting interviews, I decided to record the discussions with pen and paper. At the beginning, utilizing an audio or video recorder seemed the best way to document an interview. I found, however, that using these devices had significant drawbacks. From the outset, I sensed that the participants felt less at ease with the audio recorder present, and tended to guard their language. Moreover, when I used an audio recorder, I found that I was less attentive to non-verbal cues. After the first few interviews, I discontinued use of the recording device and immediately felt more alert during the interviewing event. This procedure helped me focus on what the participant was saying and his or her bodily expressions. Without the audio recorder, I felt more comfortable, and the participants seemed to feel more at ease and more open, frequently moving about their property to show me the actual sites of their stories.

Another reason I chose to use the pen-and-paper approach was that, when I wrote something down during the interview, I noticed that the participant made an effort to say more about the particular topic. I found that note taking was a clever way to give positive cues to the participant. More than once, a participant saw me feverishly writing and said something along the lines of, “Well if you think that is important, then I have another story for you.” Finally, after each interview, I recorded my impressions of each interview on a voice recorder; later that night, I transcribed the interview notes to a computer journal.

When I first decided to engage Wonder Valley as an empathetic insider, I searched my own motives, experiences, and identities with the place. I also created a list of people who had become inextricably linked with my everyday experience of Wonder Valley—i.e., my grandparents, my great-uncle, and two family friends. Because of ease of access and familiarity, I interviewed these friends and family first. This effort provided a useful way to refine my interviewing technique and interview guide in an amiable environment. Although each of these

first participants had his or her unique Wonder Valley stories, I found that there were many commonalities in the accounts. Despite variations in age, sex, income, and race, these individuals all seemed to share a common identity of Wonder Valley. From my experiences of Wonder Valley, however, I knew that there were other residents who had come to the community with different motives, had created a dissimilar residential landscape, and had participated in contrasting activities. For this reason, I knew I needed to expand my interview pool.

I realized early on when I was preparing a recruitment strategy for unfamiliar Wonder Valley residents that my personal safety was going to be an issue. From my first visit to my grandfather's home, I knew that Wonder Valley was a potentially dangerous place. During that visit, a police officer who was a friend of the family told me that "the safest way to see Wonder Valley is as a distant image in your rearview mirror." Although perceptions of danger are usually much greater than any real threats, some substance exists to the officer's warning. Because of its isolation, abandoned cabins, and convenient location between Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and Phoenix, Wonder Valley has an inordinate amount of violent crime and drug production for a community of approximately 1,000 residents. Because of this threat and lack of an adequate police force, most citizens are armed and take a 'shoot first, ask questions later' approach when strangers appear on their property (Figure 2.7, 2.8).

Although many outstanding empirical guides are available for interview recruitment in experiential research of communities (Eyles and Smith 1988; Hay 2006; de Wit 2003; *Geographical Review* v. 91 issues 1 & 2), their examples for observing and recruiting interview participants typically involve a less hazardous research area than Wonder Valley. Therefore, to correct the lack of breadth in my first set of interviews and to remain as safe as possible, I

recruited additional participants in two ways: First, by way of opportunistic encounters with residents (approaching residents who happened to be outside their house, contacting residents of houses that appeared to be occupied, and frequenting private gathering areas); and second, through focused recruitment of non-resident informants like governmental officials and realtors.



**Figure 2.7 Photograph of guard dog.  
(photograph from Divola 2004).**



**Figure 2.8 One of many warning signs,  
although misspelled (photograph  
by author).**

I decided that a practical and relatively safe technique for engaging potential participants would be to drive slowly along roads and watch for residents who happened to be outside their houses. This method allowed me to travel through the whole community, kept me safe from dogs, and provided a means to quickly exit any potentially dangerous situation. Once I saw a resident on his or her property, I entered the driveway, smiled, and politely waved. When I was in speaking distance, I explained I was doing a story on Wonder Valley and hoped the resident might be willing to discuss his or her experiences with the place. I approached sixteen properties in this way; although most individuals did not wish to participate, I was able to recruit four interviewees directly and acquired the names of three additional parties who, when contacted, agreed to participate.

This method was time consuming and only marginally productive, and I therefore decided to return to houses that appeared to be currently occupied. I attached a brightly colored flier to mailbox or fence with my phone number and a message explaining my dissertation work and indicating that I would return in the next few days to inquire if the resident would be willing to participate in the study. Two individuals contacted me and scheduled times to be interviewed. Four other individuals answered their door when I returned and agreed to an interview. Through this recruitment method, I increased my interview pool by nine (one of the six individuals interviewed provided contact information for three additional interview participants).

Although public areas are usually promising places to observe residents and recruit participants, I had to limit myself to private social areas in Wonder Valley, because there are no public social spaces—just a few private gathering areas that include a water-filling station (residents must import their water), a community church, a thrift store (Figure 2.9), and a bar/restaurant (Figure 2.10). All four of these places are on the edges of Wonder Valley but almost exclusively cater to Wonder Valley residents.

I did not interview the pastor of the community church, because he was new to the area and not a member of the community; I was however, able to schedule interviews with two church members. I visited the second-hand store multiple times, interviewing the owner and making interview contacts with two customers. I was able to talk briefly with residents at the water station and arrange interviews with two individuals. From one of those interviews, I was given the name of another Wonder Valley resident who eventually became an interview participant. I also sought out potential interviewees at The Palms, an inexpensive restaurant/tavern and the only operational commercial enterprise within Wonder Valley. I interviewed the owner and her daughter, who is one of the few residents to be raised from birth

in Wonder Valley. Also, members of the owner's family are part of the Palm's house band and, because of their involvement in the music and art scene; they were able to introduce me to five Wonder Valley artists whom I eventually interviewed.



**Figure 2.9 Wonder Valley Thrift Store  
(photograph by author).**



**Figure 2.10 The Palms Bar/Restaurant  
(photograph by author).**

As the above description of the interviewing process indicates, these opportunistic encounters involve two distinct phases, the first of which was meeting potential participants in a non-confrontational manner and attempting to convince them to be interviewed about their Wonder Valley experiences. The second phase involved asking participants if they could recommend other Wonder Valley residents who might be willing to be interviewed. I recruited twelve participants through this chain-referral technique, which was first described by Coleman (1958) as 'snowball sampling', a useful way of expanding the number of interviewees within a social group.

One potential shortcoming of snowball sampling is the danger of interviewing within one type of group only and thus failing to acquire a full range of descriptive accounts. Although I utilized this technique, I avoided a lack of breadth by beginning with as broad a pool of participants as possible, so that men, women, old, young, long-time residents, recent arrivals,

poor, rich, year-round residents, and part-time residents were all represented. As shown in Table 2.2, I eventually interviewed thirty-four residents, with an average age (fifty) and sex ratio (fifty-three percent male to forty seven percent female) that are very close to the average age (forty-seven) and sex ratio (fifty-five percent male to forty-five percent female) of Wonder Valley's census data (San Bernardino County census tract 104.09 block group 2). Although I did not request income information from the participants, I would deduce from their living conditions that low, middle, and upper class residents are all represented more or less equally.

I also interviewed non-resident informants who, though are not residents of Wonder Valley, held professional or volunteer positions that afforded them a firsthand familiarity. Specifically, I sought out local, regional, and federal government officials, real-estate agents, newspaper reporters and editors, and community volunteers. In total, I interviewed thirteen non-resident informants, whose names, sex, age, and relationship to Wonder Valley are detailed in Table 2.3. These informants provided useful information that supported or contradicted residents' perceptions of Wonder Valley. The interviews provided insights into Wonder Valley's history, identity, and current controversies facing the community. For example, officials from the Bureau of Land Management described the development of Wonder Valley's checkerboard ownership patterns and resulting land-use controversies. The former mayor of Twentynine Palms explained why Wonder Valley would never be incorporated into his city. Neighborhood patrol and police officers provided information on the number and type of crimes occurring in Wonder Valley, while local and regional reporters described some of the key controversies facing the community. In turn, real estate agents and a rental-property developer offered insights into shifts in Wonder Valley's residential demographics and resulting changes in property values and community identity.



<b>RESIDENT INTERVIEWEES</b>					
<b>Name</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Age</b>
*James Alexander	M	44	*Eric Henderson	M	62
*Maria Alvarado	F	31	*Scott Hill	M	38
*Jose Alvarado	M	33	*Julia Homer	F	66
*Janet Baker	F	42	*Margaret Huffington	F	71
*Kelly Benson	F	43	*Mike Johnson	M	45
*Jack Benson	M	50	*Natalie Moon	F	49
*Linda Carter	F	41	Phil Klasky	M	56
*Allen Carter	M	52	Joseph Ostrander	M	72
*Richard Daniels	M	68	Judy Ostrander	F	65
*Jill Daniels	F	65	Gene Ostrander	M	69
*Rita Dennis	F	68	*Thomas Reed	M	49
Thom Merrick	M	45	*Robert Sanderson	M	45
Chris Carraher	F	47	*Phyllis Smith	F	58
*Jason Edmondson	M	45	*Matt Thompson	M	50
*Wendy Edmondson	F	41	*Vance Turner	M	68
*Jennifer Grey	F	39	*Marcus White	M	50*
*Robert Guntherson	M	46	*Florence Young	F	45
*Betty Harris	F	43	*Lilly Young	F	22

**Table 2.2 Wonder Valley residents interviewed (\* indicates pseudonym and estimation of age by author).**

## **Homesteaders, Dystopics, and Utopics**

The question persists of when to stop fieldwork and begin to organize and communicate research results. Sometimes this problem is solved by a limited amount of time and funding. Or as in the case of my dissertation fieldwork, there comes a point of diminishing returns. After three years of numerous weeklong investigations, I concluded that my personal reflections,

review of textual information, and interviews were garnering less and less new information about Wonder Valley. Once these diminishing returns became apparent, I ended the search for new descriptive information and began to examine all the material I had collected.

Early on I noticed that the resident's experiences and connections to Wonder Valley were far from homogenous. I came to realize that Wonder Valley residents had three distinct modes of being with their place—i.e., place identities—what I came to describe as *homesteader*, *dystopic*, and *utopic*. It seemed that, experientially, Wonder Valley was 'trying' to be three different places. Tables 2.4-2.6 present the Wonder Valley participants according to this tripartite grouping.

The *homesteader* group (see table 2.4) partly derives its name from the residents themselves. These individuals were the first to settle Wonder Valley, and they and their direct descendants refer to themselves as homesteaders, or more precisely, 'jackrabbit homesteaders', the origin and meaning of which will be dealt with in Chapter 3. This homestead group, however, has more in common than just being the first families to settle Wonder Valley. Rather, these residents came to a landscape that they saw as neither good nor bad, but full of potential. By working the land—'pushing back nature' and establishing human-made structures—the potential of the environment was turned into an actual and pleasing place (Figure 2.11). Many homesteaders were Midwestern retirees who saw the land as a blank slate that demanded hard work to give rise to a part-time or full-time retreat from cold weather, congested land use, and societal and legal restrictions. After reviewing the sixteen interviews of individuals within this category, I gradually realized that there were two sub-groups of homesteaders—first, those who originally bought land in the 1940s and 1950s and their families; and second, a more recent

group who has moved to Wonder Valley in the past ten years to restore older structures but who still embody the same homesteader attitude.

NON-RESIDENT INFORMANTS			
Regional Activist	Jim Booker*	M	69
Bureau of Land Management	Pat Chassie*	M	45*
Rental Property Developer	Greg Davis	M	55*
Ex-Mayor of Twentynine Palms	Max Dube	M	72
Bureau of Land Management	Thomas Gey	M	46
San Bernardino Police Officer	Jeremy Harris*	M	44
Professor and Author	Kim Stringfellow	F	41
Los Angeles Times Reporter	Hugo Martin	M	40*
Real Estate Agent	Loraine Miller*	F	39
Twentynine Palms Historical Society	Betsie Nelson*	F	59
Neighborhood Patrol	Ernie Powell	M	72
Real Estate Agent	Helen Shipley*	F	36
Twentynine Palms Press	Allan Smith*	M	43

**Table 2.3 Non-resident informants interviewed (\* indicates pseudonym and estimation of age by author).**



**Figure 2.11 Aerial view of homesteader property featuring over an acre of clearing surrounding the house (center) and out-buildings (right). (Google Earth ®)**

The *dystopic* group (see table 2.5) are those individuals who came to Wonder Valley as a last resort or sought it out for nefarious ends. In either case, the individual is in some way pushed to the community, views Wonder Valley as a necessary evil, does not usually engage in neighboring, and shapes his or her living/operating area as a relative disamenity zone. After reviewing seven interviews of individuals within this category and drawing on other supporting material, I determined that this Wonder Valley identity is comprised of two subgroups: First, there are those who can no longer afford to live ‘down below’ (a local term for the Los Angeles basin) because of rapidly rising housing prices but who still wish to live in southern California; and second, a criminal element drawn to the area because abandoned cabins provide cover to produce illegal drugs; in addition, Wonder Valley provides easy access to the nearby Los Angeles and Las Vegas consumer markets. I was only able to interview seven individuals representing the dystopic identity, mainly because these individuals were quite difficult or dangerous to approach. To resolve this relative lack of representation, I interviewed others (e.g. law enforcement officers, reporters, and other residents) who have had experiences with these individuals or have knowledge of their motivation for being in Wonder Valley and the resulting effects on the community.



**Figure 2.12 An abandoned property often inhabited by transients (photograph by author).**

<b>HOMESTEADERS</b>	
<b>RESIDENT</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>
James Alexander*	Local handyman/recent homesteader/full-time resident
Janet Baker*	Hair stylist/recent homesteader/full-time resident
Linda Carter*	Veterinarian/2 <sup>nd</sup> generation/part-time resident
Allen Carter*	Veterinarian/2 <sup>nd</sup> generation/part-time resident
Jill Daniels*	Retired/2 <sup>nd</sup> generation/full-time resident
Richard Daniels*	Retired/2 <sup>nd</sup> generation/full-time resident
Rita Dennis*	Service Industry/1 <sup>st</sup> generation/full-time resident
Julia Horner*	Retired/2 <sup>nd</sup> generation/full-time resident
Margaret Huffington*	Retired/1 <sup>st</sup> generation/full-time resident
Natalie Moon*	Firefighter/2 <sup>nd</sup> generation/full-time resident
Gene Ostrander	Retired 2 <sup>nd</sup> generation /part-time resident
Joseph Ostrander	Retired 2 <sup>nd</sup> generation/seasonal resident
Judy Ostrander	Retired 2 <sup>nd</sup> generation / seasonal resident
Vance Turner*	Security 1 <sup>st</sup> generation homesteader/full-time resident
Florence Young*	Entrepreneur/1 <sup>st</sup> generation/full-time resident
Lilly Young*	Service industry/2 <sup>nd</sup> generation/full-time resident

**Table 2.4 Homesteader participants and summary descriptions (asterisk denotes pseudonym and estimation of age).**

<b>RESIDENT</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>
Jose Alvarado*	Low income/commuter/year round resident
Maria Alvarado*	Low-income/homemaker/year round resident
Kelly Benson*	Unemployed/year round resident
Jack Benson*	Unemployed /year round resident
Bob	Local transient/year round resident
Matt Thompson*	Low-income squatter/year round resident
Marcus White*	Low-income squatter/year round resident

**Table 2.5 Dystopic participants and summary descriptions. (asterisk denotes pseudonym and estimated age).**

The *utopic* group (see table 2.6) is comprised of individuals who perceive Wonder Valley to be inherently special, fragile, and thus in need of protection from destructive uses. These residents are mostly from southern California and San Francisco. They migrated to the area in large numbers in the 1990s and their numbers continue to grow. During this period, there has been a rebirth of interest in California's desert landscape as a beautiful place, especially following the designation of Joshua Tree National Monument as a National Park and the creation of the nearby Mojave Preserve. After reviewing textual materials and the thirteen interviews of residents within this category, I realized that this group could be divided into two general sub-groups: those who utilize their talents to *protect* their utopia and those who *focus* on sharing their utopia.

RESIDENT	DESCRIPTION
Thom Merrick	Local musician/full-time resident
Jason Edmondson*	Retired/seasonal resident
Wendy Edmondson*	Retired/seasonal resident
Chris Carraher	Visual artist/full-time resident
Alex Grey*	Retired/full-time resident/nature enthusiast
Jennifer Grey*	Retired/full-time resident/nature enthusiast
Robert Guntherson*	Visual artist/part-time resident
Eric Henderson*	Visual artist/activist/full-time resident
Scott Hill*	Artist/ full-time resident
Mike Johnson*	Artist/full-time resident
Phil Klasky	University instructor/activist/part-time resident
Thomas Reed*	Entrepreneur/activist/part-time resident
Phyllis Smith*	Visual Artist/activist/part-time resident

**Table 2.6 Utopic participants and summary descriptions.**

These three groups will each be described in turn in Chapters 4-6. I examine the homesteaders in Chapter 4, and first because this group actualized the first effective settlement in the Wonder Valley area. As homesteading declined and abandonment began to dominate the community, the landscape resembled a disamentity zone. During the late 1970s and 1980s, neighboring communities considered Wonder Valley to be a poor and derelict landscape. As is often the case, the outsider perceptions became a self-fulfilling prophecy as neighboring urban poor, transients, and the criminal element saw the area as a refuge, thus allowing a dystopic group to emerge. Chapter 5 examines the regional and local reasons for the dystopic emergence and the resulting dystopic landscapes, activities, and meanings within Wonder Valley. But in the early 1990s, however, there was a resurgence of interest in the desert as a place of natural beauty and sacred space. Chapter 6 reviews the growth of the ‘desert as beautiful’ movement and its resulting influence on the community’s utopic population, which, like the other two groups, remains a strong influence contributing to Wonder Valley’s place identity today. Chapter 7 investigates the “neutral” public spaces where the groups come into contact and conflict, shedding light on an underlying order I describe as an existential ecotone.



**Figure 2.13 upper-end rental property (Joshuadesertretreats.com)**

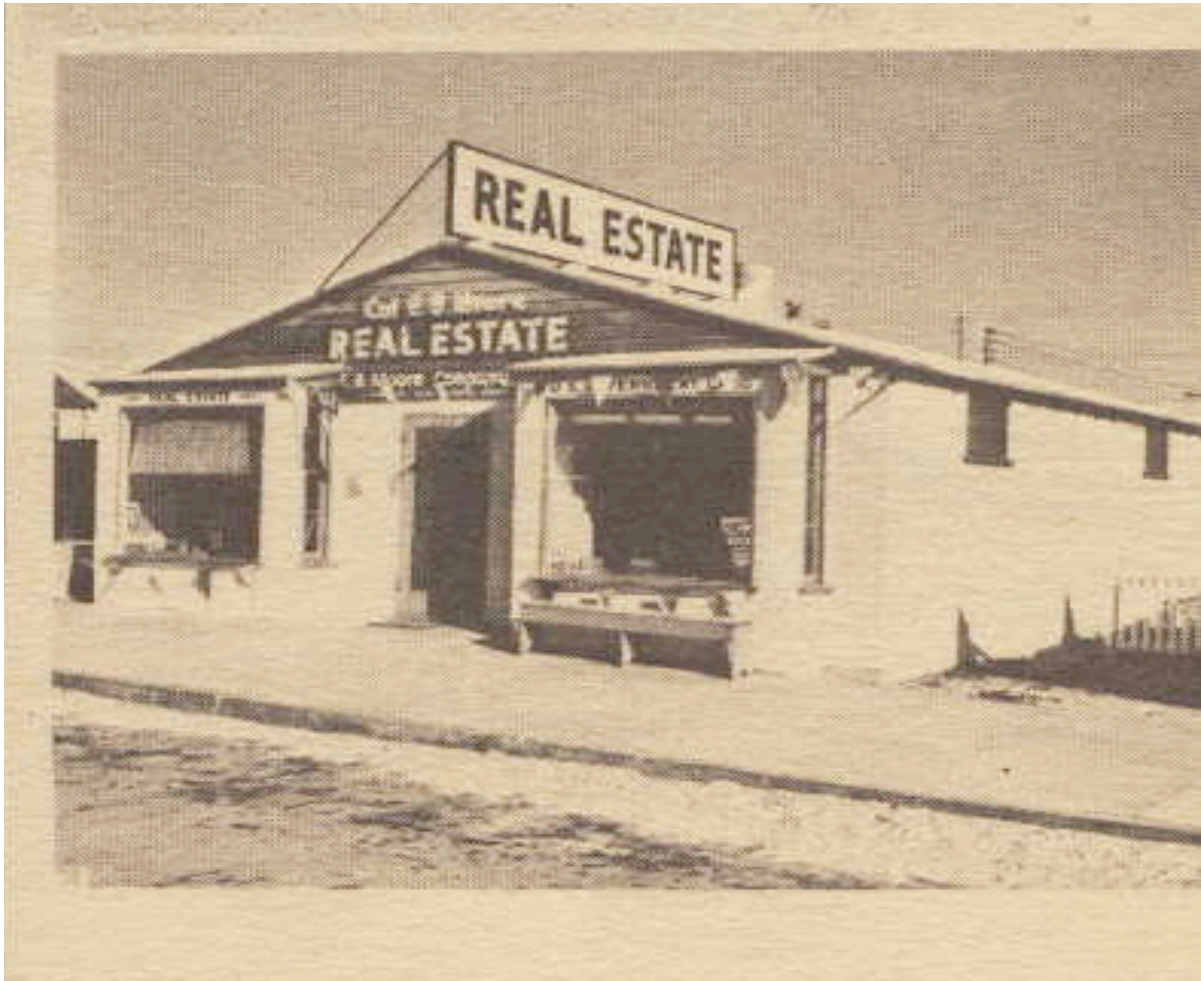


**Figure 2.14 Aerial view of rock musician Dick Dale’s ‘Skyranch.’ (Google earth ®).**

The following chapter is a historical geography that documents the genesis of Wonder Valley as a discrete location with a community consciousness beset by a half century of ever-increasing existential tension.



## CHAPTER 3 – The Emergence of Wonder Valley



## **A Place Called Wonder Valley**

No one is quite sure when Wonder Valley came into existence as a place or why it was named “Wonder Valley.” My interviews and textual evidence suggest that residents believe that the origins of the community’s name lie with Major Schooler, a retired Marine and one of the first residents of the area (Schauppner 2006; Dube 2006; Turner 2006; Smith 2005). It is said that his common description for the area in the late 1950s of “what a wonder of a valley” gained popularity and over time was shortened to “Wonder Valley” (Turner 2006). During this time, the area east of Twentynine Palms experienced rapid population growth, and residents outside the town began to think of themselves as a community of homesteaders. Somehow, the internal cohesiveness of these homesteaders, the feeling of being separate from Twentynine Palms, and the popularity of Schooler’s description led some anonymous individuals in the early 1960s to place a sign, “Welcome to Wonder Valley,” on Adobe Road at the eastern city limits of Twentynine Palms. This sign still stands today (Dube 2006; Turner 2006) (Figure 3.1).



**Figure 3.1 Wonder Valley welcome sign erected in early 1960s and still standing at the time of research (photograph by author).**

Although the exact etymology of Wonder Valley and the specific beginnings of community consciousness are unclear, it is certain that Wonder Valley came into existence because of the 1938 Small Tract Act (STA), which allowed for the disposal of five-acre allotments of federal land in the American West. The greatest concentration of these tracts was just east of Twentynine Palms in what is now Wonder Valley, and it is only here that a small-tract homestead landscape still manages to exist in the United States. In the following review on the emergence of these homesteads, I detail the origins and impact of the Small Tract Act, document the specifics of the leasing and auctioning systems of land disposal, and describe the unexpected popularity, the demise, and rebirth of small-tract homesteading.

## **Small Tract Act Origins**

The origins of the Small Tract Act can be traced back to the California desert community of Twentynine Palms. In the early 1930s, this small community consisted of a few hundred agricultural homesteaders and miners originally from Los Angeles, who lived on subdivided units of 160-acre tracts (Nelson 2006). Most of these individuals attempted (usually unsuccessfully) small-scale, groundwater-irrigated agriculture, but some were drawn to the high desert (arid lands northeast of the Los Angeles basin with elevations ranging from 1500 to 4000 feet) by the promotional efforts of James Luckie, a Pasadena doctor who specialized in treating lung ailments (Spell 1954). Luckie performed a nationwide search for the place with the best climate and air quality to aid in the recovery of tuberculosis and asthma sufferers, as well as help World War I veterans still incapacitated from poison gas attacks. He discovered that Twentynine Palms, California, had the optimal temperature range, humidity, and smog-free air to make breathing easier for his beleaguered patients (Spell 1954). Soon after his discovery of

Twentynine Palms' potential, he purchased a 160-acre parcel of land within the city limits and built a makeshift sanitarium, to which he sent twenty-eight patients with severe pulmonary distress. Luckie's efforts were a great success, as twenty-five of the twenty-eight patients dramatically improved within the first year of desert living (Moran 2005).

The news of seriously ill patients recovering and leading normal lives not only brought others with lung problems to his desert sanctuary, Californians in good health who wished to escape the increasingly polluted skies of Los Angeles also sought out the place's rejuvenating powers. Unfortunately, only approximately one hundred people were able to move to the area because of the poor road conditions leading out from the Los Angeles basin to the high desert (Ainsworth 1955). In addition, purchasers of federal land were required to make agricultural improvements on their property. Twentynine Palms may have been an excellent place to recover from pulmonary distress, but it was not an adequate location agriculturally, because the area had poor soil, limited irrigation resources, and inadequate rain—what little rain that fell usually came as a deluge that often produced devastating floods (Moran 2005).



**Figure 3.2 Print of mural depicting Dr. Luckie. The 17-by-50-foot mural was painted by artist Don Gray on the exterior of Twentynine Palms Eye Care Clinic.**

During the later 1930s, Paul Witmer, supervisor of the Office of Land Management (a section of the U.S. Department of the Interior) in Los Angeles, became aware of Luckie's remarkable results and visited the high desert to investigate the success stories. As he met with the residents and listened to their dramatic stories of recovery, Witmer and his staff quickly became convinced that the desert had great promise as a place for recuperation. He immediately commissioned his office staff to prepare a study as to how to realize the desert's potential for Los Angelinos (Ainsworth 1955).

From this study, Witmer found that one of the principal barriers to expanding settlement was the requirement of homesteaders to purchase 160 acres of land and make it agriculturally productive. Witmer suggested creating a new type of land-disposal system that removed any agricultural provisions and instead sought to develop an expansive desert utopia focused on recuperation and recreation. He proposed that the acreage of each homestead be reduced from 160 acres to a more manageable five-acre parcel—enough for an individual to build a house and have sufficient contact with the desert environment. Witmer also sought to set the price of the land low enough to allow “ordinary” Americans access to the program (Ainsworth 1955). Under his plan, the Mojave Desert would be converted from a hellish wilderness into dozens of self-sufficient recuperative communities.

Witmer sought help from the influential *Los Angeles Times* columnist Harry Carr and members of the Los Angeles chambers of commerce to convince businesses and citizens in the Los Angeles basin. The aim was to pressure federal legislators to change the homestead laws to allow small-tract settlement of the Mojave Desert (Nelson 2006; Ainsworth 1955). By 1936, Witmer had rallied enough local support to convince a few California congressmen to draft HR 5495, a bill that called for the opening of portions of the Mojave Desert to five-acre homesteads

at ten dollars per acre for Americans with health problems (BLM 1980). The bill did not have enough support in an East Coast/Midwest-dominated Congress, however, and was soundly defeated (Lee 1963). In 1937, newly elected U.S. Representative Harry R. Sheppard of California reintroduced the bill as HR 6002. Like HR 5495, this legislation would open parts of the desert for health-seekers, but HR 6002 also requested federal funds to distribute water to these future homesteads. Sheppard argued that the federal government had a great deal of unused land in the west and, in the midst of the Great Depression, small-tract homesteading could generate new state and federal income and also alleviate employment pressures in California's cities. Most federal lawmakers, however, were dubious about sending individuals into the desert and paying to supply them with water when so many Americans in Eastern cities and Midwest farms were in need of assistance and were more likely to make better use of government grants (1980). Thus, the revised bill was also defeated.

### **Passing the Small Tract Act**

Harry Carr died in 1936, and in 1938 a few of his colleagues gained greater influence at the *Los Angeles Times* and argued that a fitting tribute for the popular Carr would be a renewed effort to pass the homestead legislation that he fought so hard for at the end of his life (Ainsworth 1955). *Los Angeles Times* editors and columnists did their best to “spin” the newest homestead bill as positively as they could. The resulting groundswell of support convinced federal lawmakers previously opposed to the bill to change their vote, and in 1938 the Small Tracts Act was passed by Congress and signed into law by President Franklin Roosevelt.

By 1940, funds were made available to help decide what land would be most suitable for homesteading and how exactly that land would be disposed to the public. In 1941, the

Department of the Interior (DOI) began drafting regulations to enable the Act's measures, but any advancement towards opening the desert to homesteaders quickly halted after the attack on Pearl Harbor and America's involvement in World War II. The Small Tract Act was seen as one of the many expendable domestic-centered measures and, thus, was left unfunded throughout the war (Lee 1963). In addition, the federal government blocked any public-to-private land disposal during World War II because the Department of Defense had interests in the Mojave Desert as a training area for land and air combat maneuvers. In this sense, the STA was in direct conflict with the war effort, and, as a result, the pre-war fervor for desert homesteading markedly waned in the early 1940s (Darlington 1996; Lee 1963).

After World War II, however, there was renewed interest in desert living because of returning soldiers' familiarity with California's desert lands, improved automobile access to the desert, and increased leisure time. Because of this demand, the DOI resumed work on enacting the STA. In 1945, there were theoretically millions of acres of desert land available for public disposal. The wording of the STA, however, was so vague that the DOI had to establish rules relating to what land could be sold, under what conditions, what the price would be, what usages were allowed, and in what locations.

It was decided that western desert lands would be investigated, "classified," and then officially listed as open and available for public viewing. Classifying the land referred to the government's ranking the appropriateness of different land uses on specific tracts. Once a classification was set and an applicant's intended use met the classification, the land would be leased to the applicant for no more than five years at \$1.25 per acre (BLM 1980). At the end of the lease, the applicant was offered the opportunity to buy the land at the appraised price, which usually was between five and ten dollars an acre. If there were competing parties who planned to

use the land for the same (and best ranked) use, then the applicant who filed first won the rights to the tract. If a person put a claim on the land before it was classified and the classification fit his or her intended use, then that individual would have first rights to the land (BLM 1980).

This process shifted in 1947, when the newly formed Bureau of Land Management (BLM) took over the land disposals and dropped the five-year lease requirement but added the stipulation that the applicant must make necessary improvements as dictated by the lease's classification. These improvements usually required building a structure suitable for living purposes (twenty feet by twenty feet in size with a roof and a door) and have the structure completed within one year of the sale. The new rules also provided the opportunity of payment installments, to insure that lower-income families could also become desert homesteaders (BLM 1980).

### **Jackrabbit Homesteading, from Lease to Auction**

Witmer may have been the father of the Small Act Tract, but it was Colonel E.B. Moore who could be called the father of the jackrabbit homestead. In 1942, Moore was the ordnance-department representative on the Desert Warfare Board at Camp Young in Indio, California. While stationed there, he participated in camping excursions in Joshua Tree National Monument and visited with residents of Twentynine Palms and Joshua Tree (Ainsworth 1955). Although he was born and raised in Vermont, he developed a great appreciation for the arid American West. After World War II service, Moore was discharged and settled in Joshua Tree where he was employed by a real estate agent. In his free time, he trekked the surrounding landscape but was unable to explore the region thoroughly because there was a lack of adequate maps (1955).



While visiting the BLM district office in Los Angeles to acquire maps, Moore met Witmer, who was so impressed with Moore's local knowledge that he hired Moore to generate accurate maps to help to identify tracts around Joshua Tree and Twentynine Palms (1955). This employment fulfilled Moore's desire for adventure into previously unmapped territory and provided Witmer with accurate maps of tract locations (Moran 2006; *New York Times* 1955). During his time in and around Twentynine Palms, Moore discovered that many real estate agents were misleading the public with inaccurate maps and overpriced realty services. Since he was the most knowledgeable person regarding the area's topography, he decided to use his local knowledge and up-to-date maps as a basis for starting his own business of accurately and reputably locating tracts for potential homesteaders (Ainsworth 1955) (See figures 3.2, 3.3).

Moore distinguished himself by charging a minimal locating fee (ten dollars) and was quite successful matching buyers with the best plots of land. By 1954, Moore had single-handedly assisted over 10,000 families in filing for small tract homesteads (Ainsworth 1955). Although Moore worked throughout the Western Mojave, he concentrated his real estate efforts east of Twentynine Palms, in the area that would eventually become Wonder Valley. Largely because of his success in satisfying his clients, this area witnessed the greatest number of small tract homesteads in the nation (Darlington 1996).



**Figure 3.3 Potential homesteaders lining up for Moore's services (Ainsworth 1955).**

From 1954 to 1955, nearly 53,000 jackrabbit homestead applications were received by the BLM (BLM 1980). This large number of applicants was too much for the BLM and private realtors to manage. It became increasingly apparent that the BLM needed to revise its disposal procedures or advise Congress to create additional constraints to curb the public interest in the Small Tract Act.

In 1955, a federal congressional amendment to the Small Tract Act allowed for the direct sale of tracts via public auction with no improvement stipulations, no installment options, no need for an applicant's examination of the land, and no preference given to individuals with applications already claiming the auctioned tract (BLM 1980). These auctions only concerned tracts within the Mojave Desert area of California and Nevada (with most tracts near the towns of Joshua Tree and Yucca Valley, California) because this was the locale that applicants were most attracted to and had thus backlogged the BLM with tens of thousands of applications (Darlington 1996, *New York Times* 1957d). These auctions would speed up the disposal process by eliminating land locators and not requiring applicants to match their intended use with the best-classified use or to build a certain sized structure in a certain time period. Also, no payment-plan system existed; instead, the buyer was required to provide full cash payment at the time of purchase (BLM 1980).

These BLM auctions would offer 100 small tracts each Saturday in a small public building in Los Angeles. (*Los Angeles Times* 1957d). At the first auction, the BLM expected two to three hundred people but, instead, over 1200 would-be landowners entered the small venue (*Los Angeles Times* 1957c). The fire marshal ordered all attendees without seats to leave, but instead these individuals promptly sat down and refused to move. Tensions were high, and Witmer proposed a compromise whereby fifty of the tracts would be offered to those seated in

the chairs within the building and the other fifty would be auctioned off outside the building to those without seats (Lee 1963). The approximately 800 standees agreed and the auction commenced. *The New York Times* account reported in Table 3.1 describes the mood of the auction as it began.

- March 18, 1957 Los Angeles California-

“What am I offered for this parcel, ladies and gentlemen?” [The auctioneer] trumpeted with a hint of sarcasm. “What am I offered? Five acres, and all sand. Uncle Sam appraises it at ten dollars. But I don’t want to cheat you. Cactus and rattlesnakes go with it, but no water. It’s crawling with rattlers. No oil. No gold; government hangs onto the mineral rights. Cactus and greasewood are all you’ll ever harvest on it. Five acres of the saddest-looking desert north of the Mexican border. Forty miles from nowhere. Cost you a fortune to bring in water. What am I bid? Ten dollars an acre says the government. Who wants to lead off with—?” “Five hundred dollars!” screamed a lady in the middle of the jam-packed hall. Nobody laughed. Crazy or not the Angelenos wanted title to that desert.

**Figure 3.4 *New York Times*’ Account of the First Auction of Small Tracts, March 18, 1957. (cited in Lee 1963, 83)**

These weekly auctions continued until May 1957 when San Bernardino County officials, concerned about a potential planning catastrophe, persuaded the BLM to cease the auctions and create a congressional hearing to determine the best way to dispose of public desert lands. Although the county officials welcomed the increase in their tax rolls, they argued that the growing number of new residents and their demands for county services would rapidly outstrip the county’s budget. County officials therefore demanded a slower and more orderly disposal process. In 1959, however, to the dismay of San Bernardino County officials, the auctions resumed due to increased political pressure from Los Angelinos. This time, however, instead of offering one hundred tracts per week, the BLM rented a large stadium in El Monte, California, and sold hundreds of tracts each day. On one weekend in September 1957, over 2,000 tracts were

sold, and in one day in July 1960, the BLM auctioned off over 1,500 tracts. This steady purchase pace continued as in one month in 1962 almost 4,000 tracts were sold to the public (Lee 1963, 16).

### ***Homesteading Popularity***

The DOI and, specifically, the BLM were unprepared for the incredible interest in desert homesteading. During the auctions, the director of the BLM was quoted as saying, “It’s just not becoming clear this puzzle. The charge to buy two-and-one-half and five-acre plots of desert that twenty years ago not even shepherders would have is on full steam ahead” (*Los Angeles Times* 1957c). The federal government was caught off guard by the thousands of Californians rushing to own a few acres of desolate Mojave Desert land over one hundred miles from Los Angeles. In retrospect, however, the BLM identified three major reasons that explain the sudden popularity of jackrabbit homesteading: first, disillusionment with Los Angeles; second, improved technology for a travel-ready populace; and, third, the shift from thinking of the desert as a desolate place to that of a restorative land of limitless opportunity.

After World War II, Los Angeles and coastal Southern California were seen as paradise for those wishing to escape the bleak landscape, cold winters, and economic depression further east, in particular the Midwest and Great Plains. The reality of beautiful vistas, warm breezes, cheap land, and countless jobs, however, began to be spoiled by the millions of other Americans who were looking for the same thing. Thus, new migrants to Los Angeles discovered that their image of a California paradise was unsupported by the reality of the situation. Midwesterners realized they had only moved from one problematic place to another, and the latter place included traffic congestion, high rents, few high-paying jobs, and air pollution.

These migrants moved across the country to California, and in doing so, had already broken away from their familiar settings of extended families and long-time friends. They moved to improve their life, so when they failed to find paradise along the coast, a second move to nearby desert homesteads was not that difficult. The inexpensive land, increased freedom, and clear skies of Wonder Valley provided another chance for retirees to find Xanadu, and only one hundred miles away from the disappointing congestion of Los Angeles.

The move to the western Mojave was also made easier with the improvements in infrastructure and technology. Newly paved highways allowed more people to safely venture into the desert. As a result, many negative desert stereotypes, e.g., a barren wasteland filled with dangerous animals, were dispelled. Highway 62 proved to be the most significant of these desert roadways, because it transverses the landscape with the highest concentration of small tract parcels, an area that would eventually be called Wonder Valley. This new desert access allowed would-be settlers to familiarize themselves with the area and more readily imagine the space as a place and ultimately to imagine themselves as homesteaders. In addition, the efficient road system allowed homesteaders to live in the Los Angeles basin at first and use their Wonder Valley homes as weekend or vacation retreats that could be improved incrementally. Until electricity reached the resident's house and air conditioning was installed, most of these weekend vacation visits were limited to the fall or spring.

Although extensive road networks and technological improvements made desert living easier and Los Angeles less appealing, there was still a question as to how homesteaders not yet retired could earn an adequate income. Wonder Valley residents solved this dilemma in three ways. First, residents would only use their Wonder Valley homes as weekend retreats until retirement, at which time they sold their Los Angeles home. The sale revenue, combined with a

pension and social security, provided enough funds to live comfortably. Second, each branch of the military built large bases in the western Mojave, creating instant demand for service workers in the towns near the base. The Marines established a base directly adjacent to Wonder Valley; this base provided sufficient service employment opportunities for many Wonder Valley residents in the nearby town of Twentynine Palms. Third, residents with mechanical, plumbing, construction, and landscaping skills readily found work helping other residents with their properties, and thus creating a local informal economy.

### **Boom to Bust and Diverging Experiences**

However unexpected, the early popularity of desert homesteading continued through the 1960s and into 1970s. Although it is impossible to get an exact figure, according to the BLM and San Bernardino County officials, Wonder Valley had its largest population in the early 1970s with approximately 5,000 people residing in the area for at least part of the year (BLM 1980; San Bernardino County 2006). In 1976, unfortunately, the homesteader boom was stifled and quickly turned into a bust. The end to this early success of homesteading was set into motion by the passing of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) of 1976.

Among other social changes, America in the 1960s witnessed a growing ecological concern and a feeling of global environmental responsibility. One of the main efforts of the movement was the conservation and preservation of the country's western wilderness. Many non-government organizations, scientists, activists, and politicians felt that western public lands were being chaotically carved up due to lax enforcement by federal and state government agencies. FLPMA was designed to bring clarity to and strengthen land management practices in the West. A central aim was to re-examine the current and "best use" of millions of acres of western public lands (Schwartz 1979). This reassessment was significant for Wonder Valley in

that it overturned the Small Tract Act by prohibiting any further disposal of federal lands to private citizens for the purposes of small-tract desert homesteading (BLM 1980).

Indeed, FLPMA effectively ended Witmer's dream and the purpose of the Small Tract Act—a Mojave Desert filled with small-scale retirement and resort communities for the common citizen. Dozens of aggregations of small-tract parcels that bordered established urban areas were soon incorporated into such sprawling desert cities as Apple Valley, Joshua Tree, and Yucca Valley. At the same time that the morphing of desert homesteads into urban neighborhoods was occurring, the few isolated parcels of small tracts scattered throughout the Desert West were being repurchased by the federal government to regenerate a homogeneous, contiguous, and public land use pattern. As a result of this urbanization and reclamation of homesteads, Wonder Valley became the last large collection of remote small-tract parcels in the Desert West.

Although Wonder Valley survived FLPMA, it was left surrounded by public land and a haphazard checker-boarded land ownership pattern of private and public (BLM) acreage. Since Wonder Valley was encircled by public land, FLPMA buffered the community from any possibility of incorporation by the neighboring city of Twentynine Palms. This buffer, however, also precluded Wonder Valley from many services (water, sewage treatment, and refuse clean-up) and slowed the arrival of telephone and electric utilities. Wonder Valley continued to exist, but the new act made it impossible for real estate developers or private individuals to buy the hundreds of multi-acreage gaps of public lands. The twenty years of small-tract homesteading was not enough time for a conventional retirement/resort community to arise from the desert wilderness. The community was left with no opportunity to develop into a restorative oasis.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, Wonder Valley's population declined dramatically. The lack of any new public-to-private land disposals was compounded with large-scale abandonment of

private parcels. This abandonment took place for several reasons. First, the majority of homesteaders who purchased land in Wonder Valley in the 1950s and 1960s were retired or near retirement and thus in advanced age or deceased by the early 1980s, a situation which forced the next generations to take over, sell, or abandon their parcels. Because there were few employment opportunities, younger family members rarely took up full-time or extended part-time residence, and therefore found it extremely difficult to keep buildings and land maintained in the harsh desert environment.

Because of the incredible cost of time and money to properly maintain parcels, eventually most of the individuals and families willed property simply stopped visiting Wonder Valley and abandoned their parcel or sold it. Selling parcels of desert land proved to be difficult, however, because FLPMA took away any chance for organized community growth or holistic development. The result was abandoned homesteads (Figure 3.4), or and a few that were maintained (Figure 3.5) or expanded upon (Figure 3.6). There was no longer any future for Wonder Valley to be a middle-class Palm Springs, and thus a large contingent of prospective buyers disappeared. Before FLPMA, Wonder Valley represented endless opportunities; after FLPMA, a certainty of stagnation or contraction crushed much of the homesteading optimism. As a result, land that in the 1950s caused riots and commanded thousands of dollars a parcel could hardly be given away in the 1980s (Smith 2007).

Wonder Valley seemed doomed to be a ghost town, and it would become so except for two groups: first, relatives of original homesteaders who successfully took over parcels; and second, an influx of unemployed squatters who illegally resided in the vacant public and private lots. Low-income and criminally minded people from the Los Angeles metropolitan area began to arrive in Wonder Valley and “squat” on public and abandoned land under the cloak of



isolation (Chassie 2008). These unlawful immigrants created a vicious cycle of abandonment that increased squatter populations, which lowered property values, and in turn created further decline (Miller 2008; Shipley 2007). Thus the 1980s became the decade of abandonment in Wonder Valley. What was once a vibrant community of thousands regressed into an increasingly dystopic landscape of a few hundred official residents. Impoverished families mixed with drug makers, smugglers, and criminals on the run (Harris 2007).

Unfortunately, an exact quantitative assessment of the extent of Wonder Valley's abandonment is impossible for four reasons: first, Wonder Valley is not an official political entity with an accompanying record of population statistics; second, there is no official way to record the abandonment of a parcel if a person or family simply stops residing in their home and fails to put the parcel on the market; third, any ad hoc outsider calculation is hampered by the isolation of Wonder Valley, the isolation of cabins within Wonder Valley, and the fact that a cabin may look occupied, although it is illegally inhabited by squatters; and fourth, although the county and state keep a record of the number of dwellings, there is no definitive record of the number of inhabitants of each dwelling or any information on a dwelling's real occupancy rate.

All that is known for sure is that there were over two thousand officially occupied cabins in the 1960s, but by 1990, according to the U.S. census, only 890 official occupants of Wonder Valley remained (BLM 1980; U.S. Census Bureau 2009). Although there is a paucity of official records on Wonder Valley's abandonment, luckily plenty of residential narratives, BLM accounts, and journalistic reports detail the mass abandonment and the deserted landscape that emerged. These descriptions of decline will be brought forth and explained more thoroughly in Chapter 5's examination of the dystopic identity, which details the residents who legally and illegally filled in Wonder Valley's desolated landscape beginning in the late 1970s.



**Figure 3.5 A Typical Abandoned Wonder Valley Cabin (photograph by author).**



**Figure 3.6 Typical modernized original homesteader cabin (photograph by author).**



**Figure 3.7 Property with an original homesteader cabin to the left and a newer home to the right (photograph by author).**

It was only in the 1990s and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that a new interest in desert living materialized. This reemergence, however, had little to do with the inexpensive retirement opportunities that beckoned the homesteaders of the 1950s and 1960s or the ease of illegal squatting in the late 1970s and 1980s. These newest residents were mostly artists who saw the desert as a wilderness sanctuary and as a creative vortex in which to express themselves artistically. The adjacent Joshua Tree National Monument was upgraded to a National Park and, with this upgrade and the resulting resurgence of interest in the desert landscape, came millions of visitors and hundreds of artists, mostly from the urban coastal areas of Los Angeles and San Francisco. The dozens of working art studios quickly created a type of desert bohemia atmosphere that removed the dystopic stigma and replaced it with the idea that the surroundings were interesting and inspirational (Figures 3.7 and 3.8). This influx of the creative class in turn attracted middle and upper-class urbanite art appreciation. In a short time, there was a new boom in buying old cabins and transforming them into luxury rentals for the wealthy who wished to visit this new artistic Mecca in style (figures 3.9 and 3.10). If the 1980s was a time of abandonment, the 1990s could be labeled Wonder Valley's renaissance in both the artistic sense and in the number of legal inhabitants.





**Figures 3.8 & 3.9 Interiors of a Wonder Valley artist's studio (photographs by author).**



**Figures 3.10 & 3.11 Exterior and interior of upper-scale Wonder Valley rental property (photographs from [joshuadesertretreats.com](http://joshuadesertretreats.com)).**

The upshot of Wonder Valley's procession of initial popularity, near abandonment, and latest renaissance is that, although the community now exudes an extremely ambiguous place identity, the details of Wonder Valley's historical development shed light on the current geographic heterogeneity. In other words, each of Wonder Valley's three historical eras not only describes the evolution of the community's morphology but also bears witness to the different groups who immigrated to Wonder Valley for greatly different reasons. Although each of these three historical settlement periods constitute a type of golden age for a specific group, it is important to emphasize that each group did not disappear with the introduction of the following

group's arrival. In other words, the 1950s and 1960s homesteader era, the 1970s and 1980s squatter era, and the 1990s and 2000s artistic era all simply point to the first effective settlement of a group; each group continues to inhabit Wonder Valley today, creating a kind of palimpsest on the landscape and on the place's identity. The initial popularity brought forth a homesteader group, the near abandonment attracted a dystopic group, and the latest renaissance has become a magnet for a utopic group.

To bring enhanced clarity to these identities and Wonder Valley's identity as a whole, I focus upon and investigate these three essential shifts in Wonder Valley's history and current identity. By concentrating on each group and resulting place identity as a separate narrative, not only am I able to reach a better understanding of the essential components of the place, but these components will also point toward the common threads that make up the essence of Wonder Valley as a whole—in other words, the “Wonder Vallyness” of Wonder Valley. The following three empirical chapters, therefore, work to better understand the place identities of Wonder Valley's three primary groups.

Place, identity, and place identity are contested terms in popular culture, academia, and geography. As mentioned in Chapter 2, I use as the basis for my narratives of the Wonder Valley identities, Edward Relph's place definition, which embraces the lived qualities of a place. Relph delineated the identity of place into the three equally important and non-exclusive qualities: first, landscape, or the material presence of a place; second, activities, which relate to residents' movements, behaviors, and everyday experiences; and third, meanings, which refer to the significance, value, and emotive nature of all that surrounds and lives within the residents. In each of the following three chapters, therefore, I have sought out residents holding each of the three identities and used the methods of interviewing, observation, and participant-observation to

explore the landscape, activities, and meanings pertinent to the individual, group, and community.

After years of encountering Wonder Valley's people and places, I found that from each group's landscape, activities, and shared meanings emerged specific experiential themes. These themes pointed towards each identity's essential meaning and in total shed light on the essence of Wonder Valley. For example, in Chapter 4, I discuss that the way homesteaders create, maintain, and extend control over their dwelling and property revealed not only interesting facts but, more importantly, pointed toward the essential homesteader identity. Likewise, in Chapter 5, the dystopic group is defined by either being pushed from "normal society" and finding refuge in Wonder Valley, or being drawn to Wonder Valley's isolation for criminal purposes. In Chapter 6 I find that the utopic group accentuates their connection with their place by focusing on either "protecting" or "sharing" their utopic experience.

## CHAPTER 4 – The Homesteader Identity



## The Homesteaders

Chapter 4 is the first of three empirical chapters that investigate one of the three groups of Wonder Valley—homesteaders, dystopics, and utopics. As evidenced in Chapter 2, “place” is one of the perpetually contested terms within academic geography. My rationale for choosing an experiential lens amid such intense epistemological debate is detailed in the second chapter. Given this particular perspective on place experience and identity, it is not surprising that the structure of these empirical chapters is greatly influenced by *Place and Placelessness*, Edward Relph’s landmark monograph on experiential place-identity research. As discussed in earlier chapters, *Place and Placelessness* details the lived qualities of place and particular places for individuals and groups, warns of the homogenizing specter of placelessness, and provides an intuitive language to communicate concerns and results of research on the identity of, and with, place. Of particular concern in this dissertation is Relph’s delineation of the identity of place as three equally important and non-exclusive components: first, setting, or the material aspects of a place; second, activities, which involve the everyday movements, behaviors, events, situations, and experiences of residents; and third, meanings, which refer to the significance, value, and feelings that residents hold for the place. In the following three chapters, I utilize interviews, observations, texts, web pages, and personal participation expressly to better understand the residents’ settings, activities, and meanings, and thereby bare witness to the place identities of each of the three groups.

The search here is for answers to the fundamental questions of place, and actually all of cultural geography: “what does the place look like,” “what do the people do,” and “what does the place mean to the residents” (Foote, et al. 1994). These questions guided the first several years of this research. After these years of investigating and contemplating Wonder Valley’s people and



places, I found, however, that within each identity group's place narrative emerged a fundamental theme—e.g., the “homsteaderness” quality of the homesteader identity. These fundamental qualities will anchor each of the three empirical chapters—in Chapter 5, the fundamental dystopic themes of being “pulled in” or “pushed out,” in Chapter 6, the utopic themes of “protecting” and “sharing,” and in the present homesteader chapter, the “cycle of environmental grasp.” It is this theme of grasp that frames the discussion within this fourth chapter, and through descriptions and narratives, I present the phenomenon of Wonder Valley's homesteader identity group.

## **Environmental Grasp**

After an in-depth exploration of the homesteader group's setting, activities, and associated meanings, *environmental grasp* emerged as a fundamental theme. Environmental grasp encompasses the homesteader's heightened desire for, control over, and expansion of, his or her home and acreage. Within this attitude, the residents are involved experientially in what phenomenological philosopher Martin Heidegger termed *Zuhandenheit*, or readiness-to-hand. Although examining the nuances of readiness-to-hand's role in place experience is complex and beyond the scope of this research, fundamentally the concept suggests that there is a taken-for-granted attitude that judges a thing only in terms of its usefulness to the person—e.g., a hammer is not considered a thing in itself but a tool that connects the experiencer's intentions to his or her world through the hammer's hammering. There is no other possible unself-conscious relationship or perception of the tool called a hammer except in regard to its ability to be useful in hammering. Similarly, to the homesteader, the environs of Wonder Valley serves the purpose of being a space allowing freedom to create, maintain, and extend desires.

The same harshness that convinces many to avoid or travel past Wonder Valley provides a setting for a certain human type who revels in settling places where no one wants to go, or even witness in the physical. The inability for most to understand the landscape of Wonder Valley as a civilized space, let alone a potential dwelling place, allows Wonder Valley to be an expansive canvas for these homesteaders to paint their masterpiece. Homesteaders' use their home, surrounding property, pathways, and nearby destinations as means to display control over their environment. In my many experiences with the residents of the homesteader identity, it quickly became obvious that they exhibit a hyper "prospect and refuge" mentality in that their everyday lives are framed by their need to continually secure their shelter as well as extend and enhance their ability to view the surrounding wilderness (Appleton 1977). Yet, even with such an identity of dominance, there is a homesteader pale encompassing their property and the property of fellow homesteaders—beyond which the true desert wasteland begins.

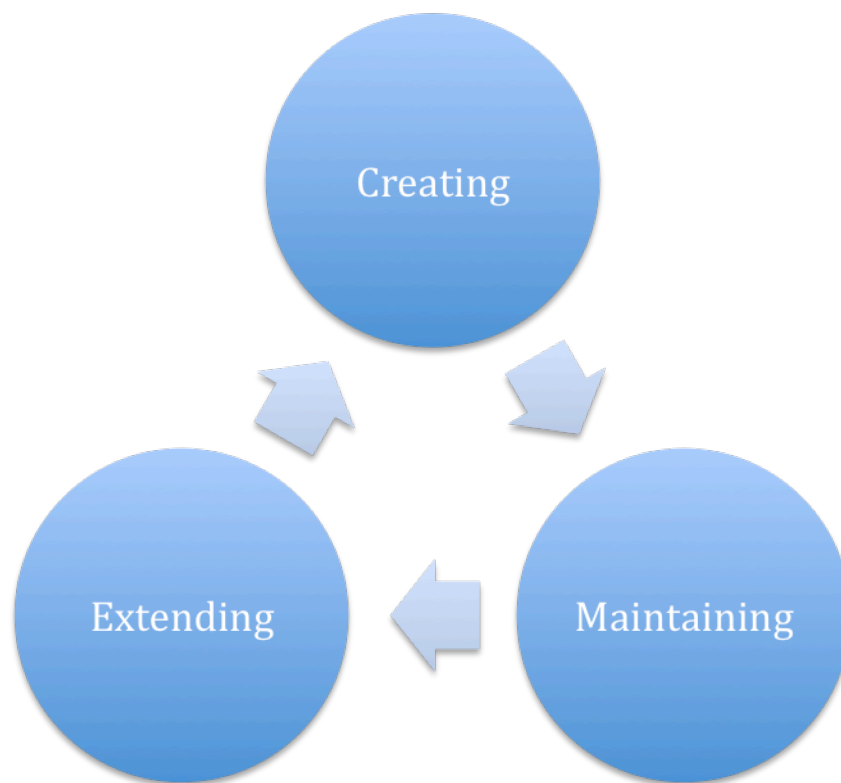
## **Cycle of Environmental Grasp**

The following sections document and explore environmental grasp through what I term the "cycle of environmental grasp" (See figure 4.1). This cycle consists of these phases: first, creating primary structures; second, maintaining both the structures and surrounding dwelling space and keeping the "desert out;" and third, extending at-homeness territorially and emotionally by constantly "filling in" the surrounding desert spaces. First, homesteaders "create" an island of civilized stability surrounded by relentless instability of wilderness. Once possessed, homesteaders next "maintain" their foothold by methodically sustaining their spaces and places of control. In the third mode, they attempt to "extend" their control by continually pushing back the encircling chaos and extending pathways to other civilized islands. Figure 4.1 illustrates this

basic homestead dwelling cycle of environmental grasp, namely *creating*, *maintaining*, and *extending*. I now discuss each of these phases in turn.

### ***Creating***

This first stage signifies the way that homesteaders transformed their parcel of land from an amalgamation of creosote, sand, and sagebrush into an ordered clearing highlighted by a habitable structure of wood, cement, and steel. This stage describes why and how the homesteaders grasped onto a small, unknown, and isolated piece of civilization amid such a harsh environment.



**Figure 4.1 Homesteader's cycle of environmental grasp.**

All sixteen Wonder Valley interviewees representative of the homesteader identity were Midwestern-born, middle-class, blue-collar workers who either acquired their land for less than fifty dollars in the 1950s and 1960s, were willed a property, or had recently purchased a parcel on the open market as a “fixer-upper” for less than \$20,000 (Nelson 2007; Moon 2006; Dennis 2007). Dozens of other residents that I would classify as belonging to this connection to Wonder Valley but not officially interviewed also rarely vary from this basic description.

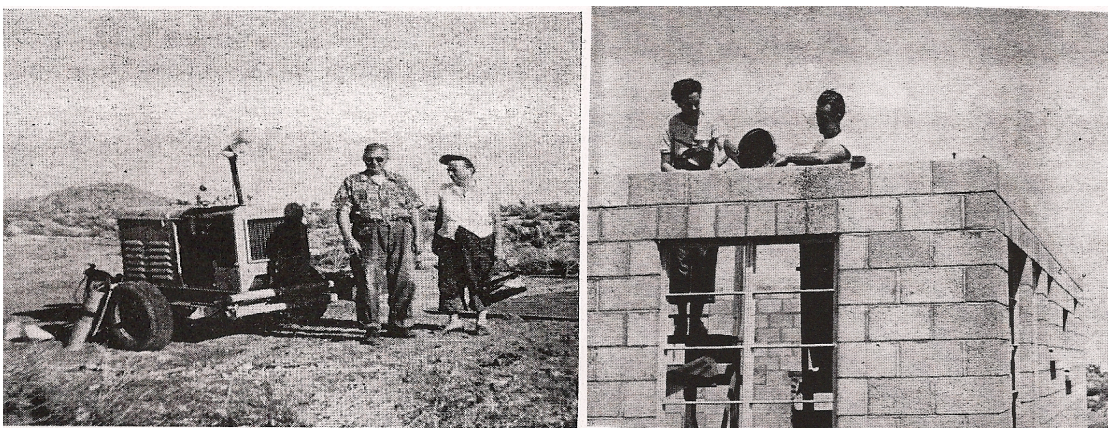
Although the interviewed and observed residents of the homesteader group gained title to their land in different ways—lease, direct purchase, bequest—all interviewees perceived and experienced Wonder Valley and its environs as a wild desert antithetical to dwelling. The vacant parcels of land were seen to hold only *potential* value. As one interviewee explained, “[the parcels] were like an early spring field waiting for the plow.” Many of the homesteaders I spoke with described, with mixed emotions, the first arrival to their virgin acreage. They were loathsome of the stubborn desert that stood in the way of a dream home, but they also had feelings of excitement that their parcel of was full of potential. Interviewee Vance Turner described an unexpected problem shared by all Wonder Valley homesteaders: “Like most people, we thought that the desert was just sand, but here the sand is filled with brush. It took four men and a tractor one week to tear the desert brush out...before we were able to even start to work on the house. We were happy to see a clear square, but we knew that the real work hadn’t even begun.” (See figures 4.2 and 4.3)

Interviews with homesteaders revealed two basic paths by which they transformed their desert space into a meaningful place. One group relied on professional builders or informal group associations to aid in building their cabin, the design of which was typically a simple reproduction of a locally advertised retail schematic (See figure 4.4). The second group was

self-reliant, doing the work themselves or with the help of immediate family to create a highly individualistic cabin, sometimes with no definitive plan in hand at the start. Interviewees Rita Dennis and the Carter family's experiences help to describe these two different types of homestead creation.

Rita and her now-deceased husband Howard were both born and raised in rural South Dakota. They met in high school and, upon graduation, married and bought a small home neighboring Howard's father's farm. They both worked for Howard's father, who was a hog farmer and row-cropped corn and beans near the Minnesota border. Howard's father died in 1954, an event that forced Howard to make a decision as to whether to take over the farm with his brother or look for work elsewhere. Conflict with his brother coupled with a cousin's descriptions of great opportunities in Los Angeles convinced Howard and Rita to forsake farming and migrate to southern California. They both quickly found employment with the local telephone company and continued to work there until retirement in the mid 1980s.

According to Rita, if it were not for the telephone company, she and her husband never would have known about Wonder Valley, let alone have made it their vacation and ultimate retirement home.



**Figures 4.2 and 4.3 Photographs of Wonder Valley homesteaders Building their cabin in the early 1950s (*Desert Magazine* October 1954).**

In the very first days at the telephone company, Rita and Howard learned that many of their fellow employees were buying desert land and building inexpensive vacation homes. Rita said that she and her husband had “just left the middle of nowhere for one of the largest cities in America only to be drawn back out into the middle of nowhere” (interview with author 2006). She added, however, that this “middle of nowhere” was an even more desolate place where “160 acres couldn’t raise even one head of cattle” (interview with author 2006). The homesteading exuberance expressed by her co-workers transformed the apparent bleakness of the location into a thrilling adventure. In only a few years, almost everyone in her telephone office had laid claim to two-and-a-half to five acres of desert land. Rita explained that in the early days, the geographical and interpersonal closeness made Wonder Valley seem like a commune: “Once someone bought land and materials, a company would pore the slab and deliver the material and then all of us would go out a few weekends and finish the cabin” (interview with author 2006). Rita said that there were about a dozen couples from the telephone company homesteading in Wonder Valley and nostalgically added that she was the last surviving homesteader of the original group.

Rita explained that each couple had approximately six cabin designs to select from, but most of her office colleagues chose the “Cactus model” because it was the easiest to construct, had the most windows, did not have a completely flat roof (making it more “Midwestern” in appearance) and readily allowed for dwelling expansion. All the couples went through the Homestead Supplies construction company to procure the materials for their cabins, and they all shared construction tasks. Rita recalled, “building the cabins was no hassle. It was so much fun to have parties with your neighbors before officially even being neighbors” (interview with author 2006).

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WE BUILD IN ANY AREA

Figure 4.4 Homestead Supplies advertisement (Source: Rita Dennis).

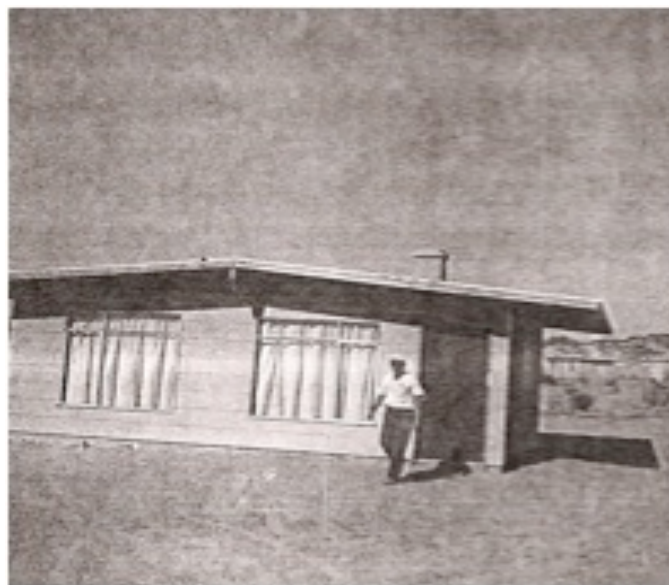


Figure 4.5 Rita and Howard Dennis's cabin circa 1960 (Source: Rita Dennis).



If Rita represents homesteaders who created their initial place through simple designs and neighborly teamwork, veterinarians Linda and Allen Carter represent the second group of homesteaders who were more self-reliant and ambitious in the creation process. Both Carters were born in Iowa but first met in California at a veterinarian conference in Long Beach. After a few dates, they realized they had many things in common, including a love for horseback riding and exploring the desert. The Carters were friends with a professor from a local college who knew of their desert passion and told them of a two-and-a-half-acre parcel that was available across the road from his cabin. Allen asked his friend for the phone number of his Wonder Valley real estate agent, and he and his wife bought the land site unseen. Arriving at the site, the Carters saw a dilapidated cabin that they eventually demolished and replaced over a three-year period with a 1,400-square-foot adobe cabin (Figure 4.6).



**Figure 4.6 The Carter's remodeled home (photograph by author).**



Linda said that the process of demolishing the rundown cabin and building their new house could have happened much more quickly than three years if they would have hired a construction company and settled for a prefabricated model home. Linda held, however, that that would have gone against their primary reason for buying land in Wonder Valley. She said, “the spirit of the place is one of self reliance, it is just you against nature, and to have someone else do all the deciding and building would be cheating” (interview with author 2007). Allen added, “we would be cheating ourselves out of a unique chance to go to a piece of land and start from scratch and create our dream” (interview with author 2007).

This dream home came at quite a cost in time and money. Because both Linda and Allen were admirers of classic adobe architecture, they wanted to create the ultimate Santa Fe style adobe. They gathered photographs of adobe homes they had seen and liked, and with the help of an architect created a composite of their ultimate dream home. Allen, however, said that first step was the easiest, because for each structural element they had to make a choice between dozens of options: i.e., location of the house’s foundation; grade of concrete; type of windows; type and amount of insulation, and so on. They both indicated that they are happy with the results but did not expect the present product to exact such a toll of them physically and financially.

This toll was too much for some of Wonder Valley’s early residents. Interviewee Max Dube, former mayor of Twentynine Palms and a longtime resident of the area, recalled that, almost as soon as homesteaders arrived east of his community, there were dozens of construction companies advertising cement, lumber, and basic architectural designs. He stated that there were some families who would build their own place drawing on their own ingenuity, but most relied on local construction businesses to guide their efforts” (interview with author 2007). The problem, however, was that many of these businesses were unfamiliar with building in the desert

with the result that the homes were just “cookie cutter” replicas of contemporary homes in Los Angeles. Many of these construction companies did not give adequate attention to how the parcel of land was placed relative to the prevailing winds, areas of likely flooding, or the sun’s location. Numerous “shacks,” as Wonder Valley settler and interviewee Rita Dennis called them, were not insulated, and this led to problems during winter months when temperatures regularly fall below 32 degrees. After the big rush to purchase land ended, most of these construction companies closed, leaving homesteaders to deal with any needed repairs or cabin expansion to themselves.

This situation of unproven construction companies and inexperienced homesteaders quickly led to a “survival of the fittest” dynamic in that those who were unable or unwilling to expend long hours of work were simply unable to sustain a habitable homestead. Early abandonment of cabins was widespread because of companies that sold substandard materials and built poor-quality cabins as well as homesteaders who were not able to make necessary repairs. By the 1960s, Wonder Valley had taken on a checkerboard appearance of occupied land interspersed with desertion. Even with so much abandonment, there today remain hundreds of residents who still call Wonder Valley home and continue to exemplify the homesteader identity—including the first settlers, second and third-generation relatives and friends, and newcomers—all of whom have not only weathered the uncertainty of living in such an unsettled environment but have also actually prospered.

### ***Maintaining***

Logically following this initial creation is the concern for what the homesteaders have created—a stage of how to maintain “here” to distinguish it from “there”. The homesteader interviewees indicated that the initial efforts of “creating” their place was difficult but done with

a clear and recognizable goal, and thus was satisfying. Maintaining what they had constructed, however, is more demoralizing because no matter how diligently one works to sustain a homestead, the desert's destructive forces are a perpetual presence. Interviewee Margaret Huffington remembered when she and her husband cleared the land and built their home: "It was an impossible job, with the heat in the day and the cold nights, and all the improvising because nothing seemed to fit right, but those days were some of the most fun that we ever had." She added, however, "a sense of creating a foothold within this wild place pushed us further and faster." She further reflected "building the cabin was probably the easiest part...keeping up the place is a day in and day out impossibility—yet every day it has to be done. The desert wants what we took from it" (interview with author 2007).

Second-generation homesteader and area Fire Chief Dorothy Moon explained in an interview that she experiences the daily struggle of maintaining her own home and protecting the property of Wonder Valley's other residents. "We are called to accidents and fires every week, there is just so much bad that can happen out here to a person and their property" (interview with author 2006). In reference to her own home, she explained that "there is no way to win, we just hope to keep up with keeping up." To overcome the difficulty and drudgery of maintenance, many homesteader interviewees employed agricultural metaphors intimating that, just as farming requires necessary chores between planting and harvesting, so Wonder Valley homesteads require a daily routine of maintaining parcel and cabin.

Despite this almost impossible challenge of maintaining even the most rudimentary structures in their desert environment, homesteaders point to the daily chores about the house as a kind of "existential glue" that binds them closer to the house as a home. As Margaret Huffington explained: "I love this cabin even more because of the sweat we put into it everyday.

It is ours and it has survived the bad weather we get here” (interview with author 2006). Indeed, grasping onto their place was done in earnest and with great satisfaction, but it is the arduous everyday task and cost of maintenance and the expansion of their property, the tightening of their grasp, that makes the homesteader cabins a dwelling.



**Figure 4.7 & 4.8 Ann McCombie raking debris on her property and trimming creosote bushes (screenshots from Higgins 2005).**

Whether interviewee Ann McCombie, an 85 year-old widow, is raking fallen palm fronds, changing the oil of her old truck, painting the exterior of her cabin, or collecting trash along the road, she epitomizes this maintenance ethic and tightens her arthritic grasp on all she has left (Higgins 2005) (Figures 4.7 and 4.8). From the moment she wakes she says she cannot wait to “get busy” doing things. As in the case with other homesteaders, she built her house, out-buildings, and driveway. A few years later she also planned and constructed a large portion of the road leading to her cabin. Ann built the road because her insurance company informed her that she lived seven miles from the fire station and that her premium would be much lower if the fire trucks could reach her house by a distance of less than six miles. After studying a map of Wonder Valley, she saw that a two-mile road cutting through BLM land would make the trip for the trucks less than the minimal distance. In the next few years, using a tractor, she cleaned out desert brush and cut a road to create “McCombie Way” and thus lower her insurance premium.

Although the road is officially on federal land, everyday she drives her truck along it smoothing out rough spots and picking up any debris (Higgins 2005).

Interviewees indicated that, besides simple survival, another impulse motivating maintenance is the intense level of neighboring among homesteaders. Judy Ostrander explains that the regular presence of neighbors and visiting family makes maintenance a constant necessity. There is a continuous effort to keep properties presentable, but as Judy explains, “it is an unwinnable war against the sand, which finds its way into every room. The place is never completely clean, but the second I stop cleaning, the sand begins to pile up” (interview with author 2005). This Sisyphus-like responsibility is more than simple housework. Julia Homer points out that “the desert is the hardest land, because it is relentlessly trying to throw you out; trying to wreck what you build” (interview with author 2006). The effort of maintenance is further intensified when friends and relatives do not fully comprehend the work required in “keeping the place up.” Julia described it this way: “If you build it they will come, but they won’t help clean up afterward.” (interview with author 2006)

Homesteaders also work to keep the desert sand outside their cabin as smooth as possible. When I first visited Wonder Valley, I observed that many of the residents have tractors or off-road-vehicles that drag a log or a metal-fence over their “yard.” I later discovered that this is a trait almost exclusively held by the homesteaders and that the type of yard upkeep can be used as an approximation of which identity group owns a particular property (See figure 4.9 and Figure 4.10). After interviewing those with dragged yards, I found three primary reasons for the practice. First, the smooth sand acts as a way to track what sort of wildlife has approached the cabin in the last twenty-four hours. Homesteaders can readily observe if they have a problem with sidewinders, wild dogs or jackrabbits. Second, residents can determine if any human has

been lurking around their property at night, and in this sense, a smoothed sand yard becomes great protection against home invasion. Although every homesteader interviewee owned a firearm and guard dog, a shoe print in the sand can be used by the resident or police for a first lead of a burglary, assault, or a murder.

According to interviews with homesteaders and San Bernardino County Sheriff's deputy Jeremy Harris, sand tracks have been critical in dozens of criminal cases. One exemplary case occurred in 2007. Harris explained that a group of Twentynine Palms teenagers traveled to abandoned cabins to ingest illegal drugs. Harris said that they mistook a vacationing homesteader's home for a vacant dwelling. Once inside, the teenagers stole several items, broke into the garage, and took the family's off-road vehicles. The owner's neighbor had smoothed the sand the previous day. When the owner returned from Las Vegas the next day, he called the police and, because of the sand tracks, the officers were able to track the off-road vehicles and the getaway car. Although the police only caught one person in the teenagers' hideout, because of the number and kind of footprints at the scene of the crime, the investigating officers were able to press the suspect for information about his accomplices and eventually arrest and gain a conviction for all involved (Interview with author 2007).

The third reason for the need of smooth sand involves a kind of aesthetic nostalgia. The homesteader residents repeatedly likened the process of sand dragging and smoothing to lawn mowing. As in the Midwest, retirees have a great deal of time around their home and a great many spend it manicuring their yards. The act of sand smoothing thus may seem a bit peculiar at first, but it is another manifestation of the residents' need for excessive maintenance defining their property from desert space and to compete with fellow homesteader's over who has the best control of their land.

It needs to be emphasized that maintaining an extreme landscape is itself an extreme behavior—it is not logical, and some would say insane, to expect and strive for a manicured landscape in such a foreboding environment. To a homesteader, it is in this need to maintain that which they created in an almost perfectionist drive that brings a satisfaction, and at-homeness. In other words, it is their peculiar intentionality towards the place, of not being content, that allows for at-homeness, happiness, and ironically a feeling of being content.



**Figure 4.9 Common model of water wagon used by Wonder Valley residents (photograph by author).**





**Figure 4.10 The smoothed sand backyard of a homestead parcel recently marked by off-road vehicle tire tracks (photograph by author).**

Although the Carters represent the “do-it-yourself” type of homestead creation story, after a few years the Carters began to meet neighboring horse riders and outdoor enthusiasts. These older residents lent local knowledge and work hours to the Carters’ subsequent building endeavors. In the next five years, with the help of their friends, they extended their cabin and built a large three-car garage, utility shed, larger well, and corral for their horses. Linda said that their dream home could have been better conceived if in the beginning they had help from neighbors—“we did not have any friends here to help us at first...we built our dream home, but it would have been easier and cheaper with our current friends help” (interview with author 2007). The Carters proudly described how their dream home emanated from their own design process and the building of their house was literally done on their own, yet now they are quite happy with helpful advice from others and neighborly assistance in building additional structures (See figures 4.11 and 4.12).





**Figure 4.11 Aerial photograph of the Carters parcel circa 2003 featuring their new cabin (Google Earth®).**



**Figure 4.12 Aerial photograph of the Carter's parcel circa 2006, demonstrating the expansion of their cabin and creation of a corral, garage, shed and well (Google Earth®).**

It should be noted that all of the interviewees I spoke with who went a similar self-reliant route eventually became friends with neighboring homesteader types and are now quite fond of the communal approach to building. The one activity that all of the homesteaders shared was a verve for helping one another expand their homes and property either through advice, lending tools, or volunteering to work on the project. For instance, Richard and Jill Daniels bought their

home and began to make changes to fit what they thought would be perfect for their needs. They quickly found out that in Wonder Valley it is best to consider the demanding cultural and physical landscape before deciding on particular materials or design. In the first year the Daniels discovered that they were too thrifty with their choice of siding as it warped in the summer's heat, and that screen doors are not a good choice with the constant blowing sand. After this first year and many pitfalls, the Daniels reached out to their neighbors for suggestions. They not only found neighbors willing to give advice, but also offer their time to help in the renovation projects. These stories are the rule, not the exception. There is not much competition among this group in terms of who has the largest or nicest house. Rather, you are evaluated by how well you maintain what you have and the amount of help you are willing to give and receive to extend your control of the desert landscape.

### *Extending*

The homesteaders extended their property by continuously building onto their house, securing their property lines and extending their footprint of civilization by pushing the desert further away. This constant building onto their property has earned the homesteaders property the title of “builtmore:”

We call these cabins “builtmores.” [The cabins] started out twenty-feet-by-twenty feet and little by little each family built more to their property. Builtmore is just a local joke comparing the sorry state of our rickety places to the Biltmore Mansion. I always say that the Biltmore may be bigger and taller than all of these cabins but I know for sure that each of our builtmores have a hell of a lot more interesting stories to tell.

—Richard Daniels, Wonder Valley resident (2007).

No one knows with certainty when the local colloquialism “builtmore” came to be used for Wonder Valley’s homesteader houses or who first coined the expression. All the residents interviewed, however, understood the meaning of the term as both a sarcastically derived homophone of the renowned Biltmore mansion in Ashville, North Carolina, and also a revealing description of *favela*-type housing found in the homestead landscape of Wonder Valley. As homesteader Richard Daniels explains in this section’s opening quotation, there are no real mansions of glory to be found within the homestead landscape of Wonder Valley, but there is definitely a community ethic that marks the core of the homesteader identity. Wonder Valley residents representative of this identity understand dwelling as a process—a practice of continuously adding on and “improving” their property with local materials, creating a palimpsest through folk materials, architecture, and levels of architectural expertise. This expansionist mentality created a distinct folk-housing landscape and is a central aspect of the homesteader place identity.

Although there are two distinct ways that the homesteaders created their desert dwelling places—“communal” tract housing and self-reliant projects—there is commonality among this identity group in the way they reclaim the land and add structures to expand their control of the 2.5-to-5-acres of land that extends from cabin to property line. The property of all observed homesteaders, including that of the interviewees, pushed back the desert flora and fauna to an “appropriate” distance. What is an appropriate distance? Through observation and interviews with the residents, I found that the distance typically depends upon how long the occupants have resided in their cabin. At first, the appropriate distance is a few yards away from the cabin with pathways to such significant places as the automobile, birdbath, birdfeeders, and a meager cactus garden (See figures 4.12, 4.13, and 4.14).

In time, the wild desert flora is eliminated from the cabin to the property line, with extensive work done on important pathways such as rifle ranges and driveways (figure 4.14). The smooth-sand look is liked best and only interrupted with small and well planned cactus gardens usually featuring a mix of endemic barrel cactus, exotic prickly pear and saguaro cacti, and a smattering of desert kitsch—e.g., spittoons, glass jugs, rusted metal, flagpoles, and various wooden creations (See figures 4.15 and 4.16). Based on my field observations, variations in the occupant's wealth do not appear to have an impact on the existence or extent of the reclaimed area, but wealth does account for the “quality” and exoticism of the kitsch and vegetation.

Although a property map of Wonder Valley is a series of platted small tracts, the desert's unconformity makes on-the-ground property determination an impossible venture. The homesteader interviewees indicated that this lack of clear boundaries provoked anxiety, since before homesteading they were accustomed to formal fence lines delineating urban lots or rural acreage. Once the desert wilderness had been sufficiently “tamed,” therefore, residents would begin marking their perimeter. The result is informal but distinct boundary markers on all homesteader properties.



**Figure 4.13 A basic rock perimeter not yet reaching the property boundary is indicative of early reclamation efforts (photograph by Rita Dennis).**



**Figure 4.14** One notes a distinct delineation between a homesteader's property and the surrounding desert; a shooting range and driveway, and off-road vehicle path extend beyond the frame (Google Earth®).

The exact type of marker varies by taste and income, with frequent use of rocks and minerals collected from nearby mines, exotic plant life, barbed wire, logs, and sometimes a generous mix of all of the above. I observed logs to be a common way to demarcate the property boundary, the driveway, and the inner “yard” (See figure 4.17). These logs allow for a semi-permeable boundary permitting foot traffic, but restricting off-road vehicles and automobile access to one or two more distantly spaced sections of the log fence. I also observed some examples of elaborate fence-and-wall systems that generate a compound feel (See figure 4.18).





**Figure 4.15 Typical yardscape kitsch on a homesteader property (photograph by author).**



**Figure 4.16 Typical yardscape kitsch on a homesteader property (photograph by author).**



**Figure 4.17 Most homesteader cabins have a well-kept driveway bordered by logs, fenceposts, stones, or vegetation creating a buffer both with the desert and the nearby public road (photograph by author).**



**Figure 4.18 Areal view of Ann McCombie's cabin and grounds; note perimeter walls and trees separating her property from surrounding desert (Google Earth®).**

## **From Grasp to Isolation**

The homesteaders' way of being is a pragmatic mélange of environmental experience sustained by a strong work ethic fueled by a pride of ownership and extension of control over acreage. What separates the homesteaders from other Wonder Valley residents is the objectification of their surroundings—people, structures, flora, and fauna are judged by their addition or subtraction to order, or ease of being organized—revealing a constant underlying need for control and expansion. This desire lies at the heart of the homesteaders' sense of dwelling and can be better understood through the idea of environmental grasp.

Although the lived themes encompassed within environmental grasp emerged from field experiences, I coined the term to clarify and organize the homesteaders' acute and unwavering need for control in their experience of "home." Schultz (1964), Buttner (1980), and Seamon

(1979) equate home with a sanctuary inviting rest, dwelling, and at-homeness—personally accessible but secure from any outside influence—assuring a calming atmosphere and granting revitalization. It takes time to make a space into a restful place, but only takes a small change to shift from rest to anxiety. For example, if there is a power outage in a Wonder Valley home during a hot summer day, then the everyday quality of at-homeness immediately is transformed from one of rest to one of worry. It becomes obvious that for adequate rest, there needs to be some sense, even if illusory, of environmental control—that “this place” is a cosmos, somehow differentiating this place from a wider space filled with the chaos of change. An air-conditioned house in the heat of day provides the illusion of safety and control and thus allows for rest. Therefore, it is, not only normal, but also required to desire a controlled situation for at-homeness to take place.

Normally, people gain their rest and at-homeness within a house or neighborhood by avoiding anxiety and protecting a perceived stability. The homesteader’s environmental grasp, however, exceeds this standard need for control. Homesteaders seek at-homeness, but their means of achieving it takes the form of seeking instability, unknown places, and chaos in order to convert “there” into “here.” For the homesteaders, the surrounding desert space is unstable and needs to be reclaimed. It is not a great leap of logic to understand how people living in a place where they think they are surrounded by infinite “non-dwelling” space react with an equal but opposite intensity for control and expansion of dwelling space. Consequently, a feeling of rest can only occur when homesteaders have a feeling of heightened control over, and expansion of, their private sphere of influence. As noted in Chapter 3, none of those approached or interviewed during my research were born and/or raised in Wonder Valley—nor did they know of any current resident born there. Everyone I spoke with moved to Wonder Valley as adults, pulling



up roots elsewhere to purposefully travel to and settle in a place with a harsh landscape and climate and with little to no employment opportunities. The homesteaders I spoke with understood the environment to be a challenge withholding tangible rewards, and, since many are retired, this is their last big project: to create, maintain, and expand their will onto the land. The residents of a homesteader identity seem not to have inhabited Wonder Valley to be secure; they came and stayed to secure Wonder Valley.

Just as this chapter has investigated the homesteader identity through the essential concept of grasp, the next chapter explores the dystopic identity and the notion of isolation. In one way, the dystopic group is similar to homesteaders in that both perceive the surrounding desert to be a wild space, but the two groups have opposing intentions of what to do with that space. Unlike the homesteaders' focus on reclamation, the dystopics desire the wild desert flora and perpetual decay of abandoned homes to meet their needs for separation and isolation. The next chapter details the people who have this dystopic place identity of Wonder Valley.

## CHAPTER 5 – The Dystopic Identity



## Dystopia

“Dystopia” arises from the synthesis of *δυσ*, ancient Greek for the modern prefix “dys,” and *τόπος*, the current prefix *topos*, which is analogous to land, place, or, region. Dystopia, thus, literally translates to “bad place” (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1989). One would assume that the etymology of dystopia and its apparent antonym, *utopia*, Greek for “ideal place,”<sup>1</sup> would have a relatively concurrent etymological evolution. Despite the terms’ inherently dualistic relationship, however, dystopia’s first documented public usage occurred in a much more unheralded fashion and over three hundred years after Thomas Moore’s introduction of the idiom in the eponymous *Utopia* (1516). Indeed, dystopia’s modern origins began as a simple political neologism “coined” in a seemingly innocuous parliamentary speech delivered by the eminent philosopher John Stuart Mill in 1868 (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1989). During a land policy debate, Mill opposed what he thought to be an idyllic, and thus, unachievable ownership allocation system. Mill declared, “It is, perhaps, too complimentary to call them Utopians, they ought rather to be called dystopians...What is commonly called Utopian is something too good to be practicable; but what they appear to favour is too bad to be practicable” (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1989).

Thus, the modern usage of “dystopia” did not simply emerge as an obvious antonym of utopia. Instead, dystopia emerged much later than the concept of utopia, in order to serve as a warning for those who attempted to actually attain a utopian situation. Any such effort, Mill believed, would not only fail, but also would paradoxically result in the creation of its opposite—a dystopia. Following this Voltarian mentality of “perfection is the enemy of the good,” Mill

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<sup>1</sup> Although “ideal place” is currently the most popular definition for utopia, it also has a close etymological connection to “no place” or impossible place.” This interesting etymological wrinkle will be explored in Chapter 6.

eloquently expressed the axiom that practical results will always be missed when the practical ideas are too easily dismissed.

In the early twentieth century, this relatively narrow definition of dystopia—tragic consequences resulting from negligence of the practical—would mature into a more complex application. Dystopia became a central theme for writers describing how a fictitious, but potentially real, government or other omnipotent force could take control of every aspect of people's lives and eliminate citizens' existential freedoms. Novels such as *1984*, *Animal Farm*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *Brave New World*, and *Logan's Run* focused on the terrifying scenarios set within contemporary totalitarian regimes, post apocalyptic civilizations, and an entire world dominated by merciless technology. These dystopian novels portrayed a world where everything may or may not be aesthetically beautiful, but in any case the human spirit is diminished, crushed, or long since extinguished. In this way, twentieth-century dystopian literature served as a metaphorical commentary on the demise of nineteenth-century utopic aspirations.

As the twentieth century progressed, there was a simultaneous intensification of crimes against humanity, world wars, famine, disease, and economic depression. There was also an advance in the media's ability to record and later disseminate these events to the public. This amalgamation brought, and still brings, the most horrific events and scarred landscapes in the history of civilization to the world community. The real images of dreadful places combined with viewers' fears that "their" place might be in danger quickly shifted vague dystopian concerns found in lackluster parliamentary speeches and literary convention into real fear experienced by much of the world's population. In this way, one of the modern definitions of dystopia became separated from the ties of utopian causation. Instead, dystopia became

synonymous with the manifestation of all that is currently horrible—being created by, carried out by, and brought to bear upon ordinary people in usually everyday circumstances.

The two earliest definitions of “dystopia” and “dystopic”<sup>2</sup>—(1) the negative consequences of striving for utopia, and (2) a literary genre featuring commentary against totalitarianism—do not lend themselves to empirical research on actual places (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1989). But the most recent definition of dystopia—an actual place with a significant amount of extremely destructive and displacing forces—adds a valuable nuance to the language of place by describing the manifestations of deprivation, oppression, and terror.

Although some places are stereotyped as being inherently dystopic, (e.g., battlefields and prisons), seemingly ordinary landscapes and communities can also be crippled by an increase in situations that are dystopic in nature. The dynamism of the dystopic qualities of a place is fascinating, since the making, sustaining, reducing, and elimination of dystopic landscapes lends itself quite nicely to theoretical and empirical geographic analysis.

## **Wonder Valley’s Dystopic Origins**

As I began my research, I found that Wonder Valley was home to a significant number of “occupants” that I describe as having a dystopic relationship with, or intentions for, their corner of Wonder Valley. It is the goal of this chapter to describe the genesis of the dystopic qualities in Wonder Valley as well as to identify the dynamics (landscape, activities, and meanings) of the community’s dystopic population. The following section details two concomitant forces largely

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<sup>2</sup> Both dystopian and dystopic are acceptable forms of dystopia. Dystopic was chosen in this dissertation because dystopian is commonly associated with a particular genre of literature, leaving dystopic with much less descriptive “baggage.”

responsible for the dystopic presence in Wonder Valley: first, the fact that the desert landscape's cultural, historical, and experiential attributes are inherently dystopic; and, second, Wonder Valley's recent history of extensive abandonment. I then investigate the groups and individuals responsible for Wonder Valley's dystopic place identity.

### ***Desert Landscape***

With the exception of two rocky uplifts (east and west portions of Valley Mountain), Wonder Valley's physical landscape is relatively flat. It gently slopes eastward from its upland western terminus towards a commercially viable salt flat, approximately eighteen miles to the east. Wonder Valley's setting is typical of the southern Mojave Desert— expansive valleys of sand, rock, creosote, sage, and arroyos that lead up to the alluvial fans seamlessly bridging the valley with the distant island uplifts of chaotic bands of tan and ocher. Since Wonder Valley occupies such a conventional desert landscape, the accumulated cultural imagery and resulting stereotypes associated with the desert easily create preconceptions and expectations of what to expect, what to do, and in essence, what Wonder Valley is.

The desert landscape is regularly associated with death, wilderness, desolation, scorching heat, dystopia, forsaken land, wasteland, emptiness, and other ominous expressions (Tuan 1977; Lane 1998; Starrs 2005). It was only in recent times that the desert gained the primary meaning of an arid biome. From the earliest documents emanating from Phoenicia, the Levant, the lower Nile River valley and Mesopotamia, desert dwelling civilizations, have equated the desert with a harsh, extreme, challenging, empty, and sometimes evil landscape. The desert was the opposite of Eden—a territory controlled by the serpent, sin, pain, and the devil. It has been an almost universal setting of temptation and struggle for gods, saviors, prophets, and other religious

heroes (Eliade 1987; Tuan 1977). At the beginning of his forty years wandering the desert, Moses was required to climb up and out of the wasteland to speak with God, and at the end of his trek was stopped short of the Promised Land. Mohammed found sanctuary in a mountain cave away from the evils of the desert lands, and Jesus spent thirty days and nights in the desert, resisting Satan's temptations while suffering through the physical pain of such an extreme landscape.

"Zero" has been traced back to the first century B.C.E Sanskrit word for negation, which also happened to be the Sanskrit word for desert. The modern English, French, Portuguese, and Italian word for "desert," emerged from the same Latin word, *desertum*, meaning to abandon place (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1989). The etymology of "wilderness" is traced back to "desert"—the two were synonymous during the Roman Republic and Empire. With the fall of Rome and the rise of Christendom, the Vulgate, the first Latin translation of the Bible, added the idea of desert as an evil place, or where God was absent. In the Middle Ages, the idea of a desert as a forsaken land was further emphasized (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1989).

Stories, metaphors, and parables of the desert's cruelty were not unique to Sanskrit, Greek, or Latin, or end with the Bible, Torah, or Koran. When the United States' territory began to extend past the 100<sup>th</sup> parallel and farther into the arid west, explorers were sent to describe exactly what was beyond, "out there," into the *terra incognita*. John Wesley Powell, a one-armed civil war veteran, was an early explorer of the western United States in the late nineteenth century. One of the first Americans to navigate the treacherous Colorado River and explore the arid Colorado Plateau, Powell was astounded by the breathtaking landscapes, but hesitant to recommend that anyone actually live in the American desert—a homesteading wasteland. In his 1878, *Report on the Arid Lands*, Powell felt that, without human improvement, the desert should

be considered a barren land unable to sustain civilization. Historian Patricia Limerick notes “Powell wanted ‘the legislative action necessary to inaugurate the enterprises by which these lands may be rescued from their present worthless state’” (Limerick 1989, 170). In other words, for the desert to be habitable, it had to stop being a desert. John Fremont, another nineteenth-century American explorer, was much more blunt when he described the desert as “‘forbidding’, ‘inhospitable’, ‘desolate’, ‘bleak’, ‘sterile’, ‘dreary’, ‘savage’, ‘barren’, ‘dismal’, ‘repulsive’, and ‘revolting’” (Limerick 1989, 29).

William Manly was in a wagon train party that went off the trail to take a “short cut” from Utah to the California coast. The detour, however, did not turn out as planned, and his party’s misfortune is why Death Valley is so named. Manly survived and, once he exited the desert and approached the coastal range, he wrote that such a scene “bursting thus upon our eyes which for months had seen only the desolation and the sadness of the desert was like getting a glimpse of paradise” (Manly 1927, 284). He further notes that he and the rest of the party “never could get over comparing [coastal California] with desolate Death Valley, for it seemed as if such strange and striking opposites could hardly exist” (286).

In the past 250 years, the Desert West has witnessed such great changes that many writers have declared the current western portion of the United States as the “New West.” This New West, however, pertains to the few urban areas and tourist resorts—places where irrigation and air conditioning have seemingly erased the desert and created cities, farms, and golf courses. Surrounding this unsustainable mirage, however, lies tens of millions of square miles of land still indicative of the dystopic desert that compelled gods, prophets, and the greatest explorers to curse the earth.



This real desert experience is rarely felt as Americans utilize interstates to cross our western sea of sand rarely feeling thirst, loathing the sun's heat, or fearing the deadly arid environment—that is until the gas runs out, the tire goes flat, or the air conditioning expires. Beyond an unfortunate breakdown, Hollywood is one of the last connections modern Americans have with the true power of the desert. Gary Hausladen (2003) found that over seventy-five percent of popular twentieth-century westerns were filmed in the Desert West, and noted, “as one looks at these landscapes for westerns, adjectives...include *stark, foreboding, dangerous, God-Forsaken*.” If Hollywood wants to reinforce that a difficult journey is the central aspect of a film, then they regularly put the story in a desert. The desert's dystopic identity also appears in many popular songs in the rock and country music genre. A recent Billy Joel song asserts, “There is no justice in the desert, because there is no God in Hell” (Joel, 2007).

Although a majority of Americans never experience the desert, they still buy into the desert experience. The myth of the dystopic desert is quite alive framing advertisements, film, and art. For some, however, there is no need to watch a Western or listen to a Toby Keith song to understand the hardships brought on by the blazing sun. Jack Benson, a long time Wonder Valley resident explained, “There is no winning, there is just surviving. As you live here the desert makes you stronger...until it kills you.” (interview with author 2006).

Since, “desert” for thousands of years has been imbued with meanings synonymous with desolation, evil, abandonment, emptiness, forsakenness, and ungodliness, it is not difficult to understand how a desert landscape has become synonymous with the spatial manifestation of a dystopia. As one drives down a lonely Mojave Desert highway and sees Wonder Valley's scattering of habitable and abandoned structures, there is instant shock, followed by curiosity—not of the abandonment, but relating to whom would live in this dystopic landscape. A local

artist who described her first recollection of Wonder Valley sums up the current perception nicely:

Joshua Tree, California is a strange place. But it doesn't hold a candle to the desert community east of here when it comes to freakiness. If you've ever taken a road trip along Highway 62 through the Mojave, you've noticed the seemingly abandoned shacks peppered across the desert landscape and probably wondered to yourself, who in god's name would live out here? There is no town, no shade, no paved roads off the highway, no water, no source of food or supplies. Just tiny shacks here and there (Stockman 2009).

### ***Local Abandonment***

In 1976, Congress passed the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA), which repealed the Small Act Tract and the earlier *laissez faire* policies of land disposal. FLPMA gave BLM a clear mission to a very murky issue on a huge scale. The agency had the charge of determining and managing the multiple uses of approximately 264 million acres of public land, mostly located in the states west of the Rocky Mountains. FLPMA brought the BLM close to National Park and Forest Service standards by “prescribing inventories, a planning process, and sustained-yield and multiple-use management” (BLM 1980). Instead of being lined up to be disposed into private hands, the public lands were increasingly seen as assets to protect for the multiple uses of the American public

The combination of stricter standards of land disposal by FLPMA and loss of desert homesteading demand resulted in virtually no new small-tract homesteads and no interest in desert homesteading for over a decade. Why the sudden lack of demand for desert property? People’s expectations were simply not met. They dreamed of relaxation, recovery, and a desert paradise just a few dozen miles away from the polluted Los Angeles basin. What they found was

that, although the climate may have been helpful for pulmonary ailments, it was a harsh place to live without any water or electricity. There was much to deal with living in substandard housing in the middle of one of the harshest landscapes and climates on Earth. After the initial small-tract boom, there were many first generation homesteaders that were tired of desert living and tried to sell their property to potential buyers. In an essay on Wonder Valley journalist Bill Hillier, explained:

[F]ew could stand the scorching months of triple-digit heat or the icy winter chill, the snow and the flash floods, or the constant wind that blasts like a furnace in the summer and bites to the bone in the winter. Most drove the three hours out here from L.A. and took a look at the dry, scruffy land blistering in the summer heat—no roads, no water—and they got right back into their cars and drove right back home (Hillier 2008,12).

Desert writer Peter Wild described how “despite buoyant spirits, close to nature often proved too much, for the newcomers found that Paradise had its flies. Big ones. The fierce heat, bad roads, lack of water, scorpions, tarantulas, rattlesnakes, lightning storms, and other perfectly natural circumstances eventually drove many of the enthusiasts back to the comforts and safety of the city” (2005, 164). Mojave Desert historian David Darlington added that, “More and more people found it difficult not only to make a living in the desert but to pay taxes on their property. The upshot was wide abandonment of the buildings which soon turned into eyesores” (1996, 276).

Local resident Mitch Dylan noted that, although “many came, many soon struggled. They tried to make it, but most eventually left. There is no beating mother nature, especially in the desert where she is always pissed” (interview with author 2008). So just as quickly as the

thousands arrived to Wonder Valley, thousands departed. This left approximately 300 to 400 residents surrounded by the perpetual decay of countless abandoned structures.

According to local government and real estate representatives, in the late 1970s and early 1980s there were at least twice as many abandoned than occupied properties in Wonder Valley (interviews with author—Dube 2007; Davis 2008). Betsie Nelson, Twentynine Palms Historical Society docent, noted that elderly retirees left the community for an easier life in adjacent cities. The increasing abandonment of permanent residents in turn precipitated a drastic reduction in the number of families who used their house as a vacation destination (interview with author 2007). As a result, significant indicators of social capital, such as newsletters, neighborhood associations, and community events disappeared. Also during this time, an increasing number of miscreants filled in the vacuum of abandonment by illegally residing in abandoned houses and stealing property from homes still occupied (interview with author 2007).



**Figures 5.1 and 5.2 Typical scenes of abandonment (photographs by author).**

In retrospect, the alacrity of the settlers was predictably delusional, as most were not familiar with, or properly prepared for, the crucible of secluded desert living. The real surprise was how a few hundred residents were properly prepared and equipped for rural desert living and became quickly acclimated and established in Wonder Valley. Within a few years, however, the

majority of the community's early residents found that their impulse to homestead was met with a stronger and opposing feeling of fear and loathing—the need to retreat from their retreat. The deepened ruts in the road leading out of Wonder Valley created by the fleeing residents would quickly heal, but the hundreds of abandoned structures made a more lasting impact on Wonder Valley's physical and social geography. The extensive abandonment quickly became a strong magnet for deviant populations.

*Los Angeles Times* reporter Hugo Martin was assigned to the high desert beat and quickly became aware of a “no-go-zone” just east of Twentynine Palms. This supposed hurdle actually became an enticement, tempting him to find out more about this community's supposed danger. He described to me that it is one of the most interesting places he has been to: “The place is wild, but not as wild as its residents” (interview with author 2006). He added that by “wild” he did not necessarily imply dangerous, but, “unsettling, and unreal.” He elaborated that although “the community is made up of different types of people, the biggest impression on a [driver passing by] or a visitor is the abandonment, and the stories of what happens in those darkest areas of the dark corner of California” (interview with author 2006). He was the sole investigator and writer for several published articles dealing with issues of the High Desert. He recalled, however, that the most interesting story dealt with how state and county officials and local residents had varying assessments of the hundreds of abandoned structures that dominate the visual landscape of Wonder Valley.

Specifically, Martin's story investigated whether federal, state, and county funds should be used to destroy and transfer the abandoned structures in a project lightheartedly entitled “shack attack.” He explained that the central issue was a “basic preservation versus modernization” debate. Martin explained, “those cabins need to be there, they show to drivers

and the rest of us that something is odd out there, and to keep driving.” (interview with author 2006). Although the story was quite successful, being picked up by the Associated Press, Martin intimated that he left the bigger story untold: “The place is unreal... it looks totally random and has a strange beauty. It should not exist. There are plenty of normal people out there, but I know the place has more than its fair share of crazies.” Similarly, former mayor of Twentynine Palms, Max Dube, commented that when he drives past Wonder Valley, “there is a negative feeling, something like a fear, that’s just there. The [homesteader] cabins and [art] studios are usually nice and kept up, but there is something unsettling about the place” (interview with author 2008).

In the mid 1980s, John Divola, Professor of Art at the University of California, drove to Wonder Valley to photograph the abandoned structures of Wonder Valley as part of a larger photo-essay project focused on abandoned architecture. On his first day in the field, however, he was unable to photograph the cabins because early in the morning as he exited his vehicle a pack of wild dogs attacked him. Luckily he closed the door before they reached him. He then went to two other planned shooting locations, but both times a dog or dog pack chased him back to his vehicle. In pragmatic fashion, he decided to table his cabin project for a new focus—the dogs of Wonder Valley. He spent several days photographing the dogs as they feverishly sprinted towards his vehicle and nipped at the vehicle’s tires. Some months later his book, *Dogs Chasing My Car*, was published (Divola 2004).



**Figure 5.3 One of the many Wonder Valley dogs John Divola photographed (Divola 2004).**

## **The Dystopic Subtypes**

As I began to accumulate and analyze photographs, interview data, local newspaper articles, and other published material from multiple field excursions, I realized that distinct variations exist within the dystopics of Wonder Valley. Two subtypes created landscapes and participated in activities equal in dystopic intensity but differing in manifestation. This delineation is engendered largely because of the particular reasons the individual chose to come to Wonder Valley. The first dystopic subtype involves the criminal element—i.e., drug producers, sex offenders, violent offenders, and thieves—who are attracted to and drawn in by Wonder Valley’s relative isolation, lack of law enforcement, residential indifference, and the short three-hour drive to Los Angeles, Las Vegas, or Phoenix. The second, subtype includes those who have been pushed out of Los Angeles or other nearby urban areas as a result of economic hardship. For this second group, Wonder Valley becomes a “rock bottom.” These two groups are associated with particular spaces, places, and activities that eventually become imbued with a dystopic meaning. The following sections of Chapter 5 describe each of the dystopic subtypes in turn—first, those pulled in; and, second, those pushed in.

### ***Pulled In***

Although most residents of Southern California have not been to Wonder Valley, a widespread perception views that the land just east of the high desert communities along Highway 62 is dangerous as it exhibits an elevated incidence of crime, particularly illegal drug production. (Darlington 1996; Stockman 2009) Artists searching for an audience often pander to and imitate stereotypes to be more readily accepted by consumers. Thus, it is not surprising that several films and songs have reified the public’s presumption of an inherently unsafe Wonder

Valley. For example, a Los Angeles entertainment company promoted *McCombie Way*, a film focused on the simple life of an elderly woman who lives in Wonder Valley as set in a land “inhabited by meth lab operators” (Higgins 2005). The Los Angeles-based indie-rock music group *I See Hawks in L.A.* composed “Wonder Valley Fight Song,” which not only received critical acclaim at its release in 2004, but also saw considerable radio airtime on Southern California rock stations. (Horowitz 2008). The song’s lyrics focus on Wonder Valley’s dystopic nature, as exhibited by the first verse;

The desk clerk at the Motel 6 just past the Marine Base  
He said this here is a nice little region, but  
Stay away from Wonder Valley  
The desk clerk said stay away from Wonder Valley  
They sell the methamphetamine behind the alley  
They could go insane  
They could kill little Sally

According to San Bernardino County Sheriff’s Deputy Jeremy Harris, however, the perception is close to reality, as “most places say they are the meth capital of the world, [but] most of it is just a story...here it is definitely real and really scary” (interview with author 2007). Harris stated that there is a long history and continual production, transfer, and storage of illegal substances, namely, methamphetamines, marijuana, cocaine, ecstasy, and hallucinogens. He elaborated: “Wonder Valley gives the producers plenty of places to make whatever they want and they don’t have to cross borders or deal with checkpoints. I hate to say it, but if they are smart it is impossible to do anything. Here, they win” (interview with author 2007).

The only time a drug-production lab is found is when a separate incident draws attention and a warrant, the lab explodes, or the producers poison themselves with the toxic-production



chemicals and are eventually found dead. Proactive public safety is left to the residents. There is one patrol car that will drive through the valley in the early part of the day and then again at nightfall. There is also a state police presence but that is almost exclusively for highway issues such as speeding and DUI. The upshot is that the criminalization of drug production in Wonder Valley maybe *de jure*, but because of the extensive size of Wonder Valley, the lack of police enforcement, and overwhelming apathy, the de facto reality is that Wonder Valley is a place of virtual decriminalization of methamphetamine production and distribution.

Methamphetamine production, in particular, is a significant issue for Wonder Valley and all of the other desert communities along Highway 62. City, county, state, and federal officials and the residents of nearby communities tolerate the production of methamphetamines in Wonder Valley. Much like prostitution in urban areas, although illegal, many residents are aware of its presence and participants. Yet it is largely ignored as long as the activity is not located too close to the residents' property. In addition to occurring safe distances from their neighborhood, residential surveys have also indicated that these criminal acts remain in a permanent place. Segregating the crime to a certain place assures the residents that all the other areas of the community are safe. Residents of Wonder Valley, however, are also much more apathetic to the production of methamphetamines, and its occurrence in their immediate vicinity compared to the normal reactions found in other American communities. This is due to the widely dispersed nature of properties in Wonder Valley; a pervasive libertarian attitude that what goes on in one's home is no one else's concern in addition to an apathetic feeling that the problem is so widespread that it is impossible to stop. In fact, many of the interviewees held the opinion of Julia Homer that "it is comforting to know where exactly where meth production was taking place so [we know] where not to go" (interview with author 2007). Furthermore, Homer said

that unfamiliar vehicles draw a lot of attention, but if the vehicle pulls into a known meth lab, then it actually relaxes the residents' anxiety because "they are not going to cause trouble outside their property... they keep to themselves" (interview with author 2007).

Wonder Valley residents are aware of the perceptions and realities of their community. Although their heightened desire for privacy in a sense condones methamphetamine production, many are not pleased with being negatively branded an outlaw when people find out where they live. In an email correspondence homesteader Dorothy Moon explained that "those that are making decisions for our valley are making them without regard to our opinions AND without acknowledging that we all really do live here, are NOT owners of a meth lab, or all felonious" (email correspondence with author 2010).

In addition to illegal drug production, Wonder Valley also has one of the largest percentages of sex offenders in America. Of the nearly 1,000 residents, ten are registered sex offenders. Wonder Valley's 1% figure may seem low, but it is five times the national average of .2% and over three times California's (tenth highest) state percentage of .3% (NCMEC 2009). Officer Harris explained that almost every one of the registered sex offenders in Wonder Valley committed their initial offense outside of Wonder Valley: "Wonder Valley just happens to be an opportune place for these guys to move to because there are no schools nearby and they can live without drawing much attention" (interview with author 2008).

What is disturbing is that for every conviction there are at least three, and in some studies as many as 175, other victims that have not yet come forward to press charges. Even if their initial crime was committed outside the area, they now live in Wonder Valley. Sex offenders have a recidivism rate of approximately ten percent. If one uses the conservative estimate of three victims per one conviction, that means one of the ten living in Wonder Valley is likely to

be arrested within three years, and the individual will likely have victimized at least three other children in the area before being arrested. (NCMEC 2009) Officer Harris added that those are just the *registered* sex offenders; there are likely more who were registered in another state and moved to Wonder Valley without notifying law enforcement.

Although the presence of a relatively large number of registered sex offenders is one dystopic indicator, Wonder Valley usually makes headlines from the unusually high rate of murders, violent assaults, and dead bodies discovered. Table 5.1 illustrates the relatively high rate of violence occurring in Wonder Valley over the past eighteen and a half years. The numbers do not appear elevated at first, but when the approximate population of 1,000 residents is considered (an approximation of Wonder Valley's population for the time period) the rates become significant: A resident is murdered by another party, or by their own hand, every 1.4 years. Wonder Valley's average per capita murder rate (.39/1000) would have ranked seventh highest in the world in 2009, ahead of Colombia (.35/1000) and South Africa (.37/1000), almost eight times the U.S. homicide rate (.05), and second among U.S. cities, falling short of Baltimore (.435/1000) (USBJS 2004; UNODC 2005; FBI 2005). The suicide rate for Wonder Valley's was .32/1000, three times the national average (.11/1000). Reported and confirmed incidences of rape in Wonder Valley (.65/1000) are double the national average (.3/1000) (WHO 2008; San Bernardino County Sheriff's Office 2010). The general assault rates of Wonder Valley are comparable to those of South Africa and Colombia (12/1000)—two of the highest in the world (WHO 1995; UNODC 2001; FBI 2008; San Bernardino County Sheriff's Office 2010).

Year	Dead Body (not murder or suicide)	Homicide	Suicide	Battery	Assault with Deadly Weapon	Spouse Abuse	Rape (non- specific)	Robbery
1992	3	0	0	3	0	0	0	1
1993	3	0	2	8	3	2	3	0
1994	2	0	0	5	5	5	1	0
1995	3	0	0	2	3	10	3	0
1996	1	2	1	4	6	2	0	2
1997	1	0	0	5	5	3	0	1
1998	0	0	0	4	1	5	0	0
1999	2	0	0	2	3	1	1	2
2000	0	0	0	3	4	5	0	0
2001	1	0	0	1	3	1	0	0
2002	2	0	1	6	4	3	0	1
2003	0	1	0	3	5	4	2	0
2004	1	0	0	3	3	3	1	1
2005	6	1	0	8	2	3	0	0
2006	3	0	0	5	2	2	0	1
2007	2	0	0	5	0	1	0	0
2008	3	0	0	4	1	2	0	0
2009	2	2	1	2	2	3	1	0
2010	2	1	1	1	1	1	0	0
<b>Totals:</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>9</b>

**Table 5.1 Violent Crime Statistics for Wonder Valley 1992-2010 (San Bernardino Sheriff's Office).**

Of all the violent crimes, robbery is near, or less than, the national average. Wonder Valley has had an average of 1 robbery every two years, and only three robberies in the past decade. This is less than half the national average since 1992, and one-fourth the national average for the past decade (San Bernardino County Sheriff's Office 2010). Twentynine Palms Police Chief Captain Donnie Miller explained the reasons behind the statistic, "robbery is larceny under threat of violence...half of the properties are abandoned and most of the other half are not occupied in the summer or during weekdays...it is hard to do violence to someone who is not there" (Miller 2009).

A review of the Twentynine Palms newspaper archive supplies considerable descriptive evidence suggesting that not only is Wonder Valley's crime rate elevated, but the nature of the crimes are extreme for a community of 100,000 residents, let alone 1,000. A sample of some of

the violent crimes that have occurred in just the past three years include: a man who attempted to murder two sheriff's deputies with his car; a husband who killed his wife and then killed himself by setting off explosives; a man who allegedly stabbed and almost killed two brothers for no apparent reason; a resident who repeatedly beat and attempted to kill his grandmother; and several bodies that were found tied and gagged with bullet wounds in their skulls.

The most widely covered crime story in the past decade unfolded in October 2000. John and Carrie Lee Davis (husband and wife) and Faye Potts (the family's babysitter) were arrested for murder, torture, child abuse and false imprisonment. In 1990, the three beat the Davis' six-year-old son, Rainbow Lord, to death. To cover up the crime, they burned the child in their burning barrel and for the next ten years regularly whipped and beat their other two children Yahweh and Angel and caged them in a small closet. On October 14, 2000, Angel escaped from the cage and made a 911 call that led police to the home. Shortly after being incarcerated, John Davis committed suicide (his death was not included in the Wonder Valley statistics). A news report from a jailhouse interview stated that Davis "presided over a camouflaged desert compound" and "believed he was something of a surrogate for God...he said that he did not abuse his three children and that, after finding salvation while fighting in the Vietnam War, he believed he could not sin" (Gold 2001). Both Potts and Carrie Lee were convicted, although Carrie Lee was remanded to a state hospital. Son Yahweh, renamed Jerry, moved to San Bernardino but was shot and killed in 2007 because the shooter, Randy Venezuela, "did not like the way Davis looked at him." (Moore 2008).

Although, methamphetamines, child molestation, and brutal murders regularly find their way into headlines, property theft and destruction of property are the most significant types of crime for the Wonder Valley residents I spoke with. Since most property crimes go unreported, it

is impossible to determine an accurate number of occurrences and total damage, but every respondent described at least one instance of significant property theft or damage. Officer Harris said that vandalism, breaking an entering, and various property thefts are a daily occurrence (interview with author 2007). According to Wonder Valley resident Gene Ostrander, “it is going to happen, it is just a matter of when, how much damage, and if anyone gets hurt” (interview with author 2007). He speaks from experience, as his house and garage have been broken into or damaged “too many times to count” over the past twenty years. The worst incident occurred a few summers ago when his off-road vehicles were stolen and the inside of his home was completely destroyed by sledgehammer fractures, axe cuts, and fire damage.



**Figure 5.4 The “Plexihouse” prototype early 2007.**



**Figure 5.5 The remains of the “Plexihouse” late 2007.**

The razing of the *Plexihouse Experiment* is an exemplary case of the severity of property theft and vandalism. Jason Rhodes and Lucy Dood created an artful, sustainable housing design focused on the durability of plexiglass and the importance of color in everyday life. One of the prototypes was built in Wonder Valley to test its ability to withstand extreme weather. The Plexiglass house, as the locals referred to it, was built in early 2007. By the end of that year, almost every nail, beam, and piece of plexiglass were torn apart and removed and the few pieces left were set ablaze. In a community blog, one Wonder Valley resident demonstrates the apathy

and callousness: “Who did it? Who knows and really who gives a rat’s ass. Could have been Tweakers...Pretty cool piece of Yart (yard art) though” (O’Brien 2009)

According to Officer Harris, murder, assault, and drug production is attributed to outsiders drawn to the area, but residents and squatters of Wonder Valley, and minors from Twentynine Palms, probably perpetrate most of the cases of burglary and theft. The key for protecting property is to reduce opportunities for theft and break-ins. Harris stated that, because of its closeness to other cities and rural isolation, Wonder Valley is vulnerable. He stated what my other interviews and observations confirmed—every resident secures their property with some combination of locks, firearms, guard dogs, home security systems, and motion detectors. But Harris was also quick to add that any safety provisions “will make a home safer, but not safe” (interview with author 2007).

Because of the imminent threat, in some cases the criminals are not the most dangerous people in the community. Many residents are military veterans and/or have access to deadly anti-personnel devices. Officer Harris explained that there have been extreme measures taken by some property owners including (but not limited to) land mines, razor wire, and trip lines activating many different and elaborate weaponry (interview with author 2007). An older resident stated “the best way to defend your property is to convince the bad guys that you are bad shit crazy” (interview with author 2006).

### ***Pushed out***

If you look at the communities on Highway 62 starting with Palm Springs it is easy to see that wealth dramatically decreases as you travel from west to east. Wonder Valley is the last stop on Highway 62. It catches all of those who are pushed on down the line. Wonder Valley is their “rock bottom” (Shipley, interview with author 2008).

The second group of Wonder Valley residents representative of the dystopic experience is comprised of individuals forced out of their previous communities and out of normal life because of divorce, bankruptcy, poverty, or drugs. These people have had unexpected or self-inflicted consequences that made it impossible to live in a more typical community. Many of these people have been shunned by their family, avoided by former friends, and unable to find employment. As a result, they were, or felt they were, pushed out of normal society, and found that one place they could sustain some kind of life was Wonder Valley. For those not evading law enforcement, they are able to receive state and federal government aid by maintaining a post office box in Twentynine Palms, while “squatting” on BLM or abandoned private land. In Wonder Valley, the lawyers, debt collectors, gangs, and violent family members no longer bother them. They can virtually disappear and evade outstanding warrants. Here they hope for a fresh start. They can create new friendships surrounded by others facing similar predicaments.

Despite the popular notion of the easy life living on public assistance, there is a stigma and strong sense of melancholy amongst this group. Although they may appear content, many of these individuals would rather be “back home, when things were normal.” Unfortunately, going back home is not usually an option. Some of the squatters in Wonder Valley have tried to stay just for a short time and then return to a normal life, but according to one squatter, one often finds himself “falling further behind and farther into the desert” (interview with author 2007).

Although Wonder Valley may be a new start, for many squatters it is also the place where they will live out the rest of their lives. This is demonstrated by the eventual deterioration of self worth. My observations and interviews indicate that those who are new to squatting in Wonder Valley emphasize a determination to stabilize their lives and return to their previous life, while those who have lived the squatter life for a few years understand the potential permanence



of their impermanent situation. They realize that, although it is nearly impossible to return to normal society, Wonder Valley embraces a kind of comfort in that they cannot fall any further out of society. Although this “rock bottom,” creates a crude stabilizing foundation, it is a foundation that will never be built upon.

Although I was able to speak with a few of the squatters and gain some perspective on their lives, I was not able to gather enough information on any one person or family to adequately tell their story. Luckily, I was able to interview Bill Hillyard, a family friend, a one-time resident of Wonder Valley, and a journalist. Bill’s life work and resulting essays focus on the plight of homeless populations in the American West. He has gained entry into a few of the squatters’ lives and has spent more time with Wonder Valley’s squatter population than any other resident or researcher. Because of his expertise, I was encouraged when he agreed with my categorization of the residents of Wonder Valley. In an email correspondence he stated, “homesteaders, dystopians, and utopians seems to describe the residents perfectly...the breakdown highlights the polarization of the community” (email correspondence with author 2008).

Through multiple conversations, email correspondence, and a review of Hillyard’s essays, I was able to better understand the lifeworld of the squatter population. His latest article, “Wonder Valley,” was published by the *Denver Voice*, a publication focused on exploring and improving the lives of the homeless (2008). In this article, he provides a glimpse into the lives of three Wonder Valley squatters—Ned Bray, his friend Ricka, and her son Torry. As with two squatters I was able to briefly interview during my research, their lives centered on their home—an old school bus.

Hillyard described how Ned, Ricka, and Torry moved from property to property in a 1950 Wayne school bus that functioned as their transportation and their shelter:

She towed it place to place, connecting to power at vacant shacks until the power company caught on. She was smart, she knew the system. But without a fixed address, she lost other benefits, too, the Meals On Wheels, the county in-home service worker. The artists and writers and snowbirds and retirees watched her through their tinted windows; can you believe the way she lives? they asked one another.

After a few years Torry left the bus and moved into an abandoned Wonder Valley property. Hillyard described Torry's house as looking like it had exploded:

The doors were flung open, the windows smashed out, the insides thrown outside, scattered everywhere—household items, children's clothes, books and papers. Cars left where they died. A bible standing on end blocked the dirt drive, its pages swollen thick in the heat. A couple of pit bulls bounded at me from under a ten-foot travel trailer parked behind the house.



**Figure 5.6 & 5.7 Same bus used as a home amid two different squatter landscapes circa 2005 (figure 5.8 by author) & 2008 (figure 5.9 by Preston Drake-Hillyard).**

Although there is no rent to pay and a certain freedom that comes with squatting, it is a dangerous activity given Wonder Valley's extreme environment. It quickly becomes deadly for

any of the dystopics without air conditioning during the intense heat of the summer months. Ricka's bus did not have air conditioning.

The heat peaked at 118 degrees the day Ned Bray stopped by to check on Ricka and found her lying naked on the bed of her bus. Ned had been worried about her—she'd run out of water, she wasn't tolerating the heat so well...It took the paramedics thirty-seven minutes to drive...up the washboard dirt road, past the remains of old homestead cabins, cross over the wash, past Torry's ramshackle shack to the dilapidated cabin where Ricka had parked her bus. It didn't matter. Ricka McGuire, lying in the bed of her bus, had long been dead.

After Ricka's death, Ned Bray bought the bus from Torry—who had just moved into an apartment in Twentynine Palms battling a methamphetamine addiction. Hillyard returned to Wonder Valley because, he had heard that Ned had bought the bus and moved it next to the abandoned shack he was currently occupying. Unfortunately, Hillyard did not know where this property was. He stopped and asked a lady outside of her trailer if she knew where Ned lived:

She didn't seem too used to visitors. Popping out of the trailer, she pulled an oversized shirt over her body; her heavy pale breasts squished out through the cut-off arm holes as she pointed the direction to Ned's. She's been living out here for a couple of years, she said, waiting for her SSI to come through, then she's moving, gonna get an apartment somewhere out of the dirt and the heat.

Hillyard leaves the reader with a description of the surrounding landscape and odd activities of the bus's current owner:

Ned was organizing, moving carburetors to the carburetor pile, the rearview mirrors to the rearview mirror pile, the bicycle wheels, toilet seats. He stacks and restacks his stuff with swift jerky movements, winding his way through an elaborate maze of things. "It's not right what the county's doing, man," he said.

He had received a notice of violation from the county; they insist he clean the place up.



**Figure 5.8 Wonder Valley Squatter.**  
(Photograph by Preston Drake-Hillyard).



**Figure 5.9 Wonder Valley Squatter “front yard”**  
(Photograph by Preston Drake-Hillyard).

## **From Dystopia to Utopia**

It is the certain uncertainty that dystopics bring to Wonder Valley that adds a threatening layer of place meaning and presents an ominous scene to those driving through the area. The dystopic landscape and the desert complement each other and create a cultural landscape that is more intense than either alone. This peculiar *mélange* of occupying an abandoned setting makes dystopics easy to locate but difficult and dangerous to approach. There is a definite frustration for a researcher seeking to understand another person’s world when they are so easy to see but so difficult to connect with. As a result, most of the information in this chapter came from reliable secondary sources and personal observation. Conversely, the following chapter investigates the utopics and was quite the opposite experience. There were an overwhelming number of people who were easy to contact and were more than willing to share large parts of their day discussing their life and Wonder Valley. There were also numerous primary sources reflecting the residents’ place experience since visual artists, writers, musicians, and designers make up the majority of this group.

## CHAPTER 6 – The Utopic Identity



## Utopia

As explained in Chapter 5, the popular usage of “utopia” appeared in the sixteenth century following Sir Thomas Moore’s *Utopia*, published in 1516. *Utopia* is set on a faraway Atlantic island that had achieved a perfect society. Moore’s book, however, also implicitly casts Utopia as an inherently impossible place—it was not only a story of someplace that never was, but also one that never could be. This comingling of apparent opposites within the same neologism is what makes Moore’s work so brilliant. With one word, he both demonstrates the natural drive to create, or find, a perfect place and then reveals the absolute folly of such a desire.

Interestingly, for almost one hundred years, utopia’s primary meaning was “having no known location” (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1989). Besides Moore’s first usage in 1516, the term utopia was not popularly synonymous with an ideal place until 1621 (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1989). Later, in the seventeenth century, the two competing connotations of utopia were synthesized into yet another meaning—the impossibly ideal. It was only during the late nineteenth century that the term “utopian” began to become associated with individuals or groups who attempted to transform Moore’s allegory into real places (e.g. New Harmony, Indiana) (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1989).

How can such a word exist where its two primary definitions are contradictory and the synthesis of the two is inherently impossible? The answer lies with prefix variations of the two root homophones. Utopia is derived from both *outopos* and *eutopos*. (Carey 2000). *Outopos* means having no place, while *eutopos* refers to a perfect place. Which is the “original” root is still a matter of academic debate. John Carey, one of the leading scholars of utopia’s etymology, indicates in the *Faber Book of Utopias* (2000), that the more accurate definition of Utopia is the

“*outopos*”-based meaning because all imaginary good places and imaginary bad places are first imaginary:

It has often been taken to mean good place, through confusion of its first syllable with the Greek *eu* as in euphemism or eulogy. As a result of this mix-up, another word dystopia has been invented, to mean bad place. But, strictly speaking, imaginary good places and imaginary bad places are all utopias, or nowheres (Carey 2000, 7)

Despite recent theoretical arguments in the twentieth and twenty-first century, “utopia” has been increasingly used to describe planned communities resulting in an ideal society or settings for morality plays in fictional literature (Carey 2000, xi) The “*eu*”*topos* definition, therefore, has increasingly carried precedence over “*ou*”*topos*, perhaps because the drive to find perfection is more essential to the human experience than the annihilation of places (Carey 2000). This public sanguinity is analogous to opinions on the afterlife that witness far greater numbers of people believing in a perfect heaven controlled by a perfect God rather than the atheistic belief in the eventual absence of being-in-place, or existence.

## **Wonder Valley’s Utopic Origins**

Just as with dystopia, utopia is an ambiguous concept that has changed in meaning and complexity over time. In this dissertation research, “utopic”<sup>3</sup> is a term that describes the act, or person performing the act, of searching for or maintaining what they believe to be a perfect or sacred place. The following section explores how the desert landscape has come to be seen as a

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<sup>3</sup>I chose “utopic” to avoid confusion with “utopian,” which is commonly associated with a particular genre of literature or a type of planned community. Utopic carries much less definition “baggage.”

utopic or sacred place. Specifically, I describe how in the past half-century the desert's dystopic labels also come to incorporate the utopic. During this time, the perception of desert has shifted from being a hell on Earth to being also heaven on Earth. The desert became an expansive and extreme example of Meinig's "Beholding eye: Ten versions of the same scene" (1976) in that the same desert landscape most commonly viewed as a revolting wasteland also became a vision of paradise. Although it is obvious that variations in intentions and past experiences shade the way we interpret a particular place, very few places have such polarity. The chapter's second section explores the resulting policy implications arising from this abrupt change in popular attitude. If the desert quickly became special to many people, it follows that changes in policy would need to shift to protect the desert. The new policies could then have a causative effect by officially endorsing the utopic perspective. This trend is exactly what has happened, especially in the past forty years.

The last part of the chapter introduces and describes Wonder Valley's utopic place identity, to which the concept of *heirophany* is implicitly central. "Hierophany" emerges from the Greek roots *hieros*, meaning "sacred" or "holy," and *phainein* meaning "to reveal;" literally to reveal something sacred (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1989). More precisely, heirophany describes the phenomenon of experiencing the sacred in what is usually considered the profane or secular (Eliade 1961, 1987; Lane 2001) The observable profane/secular world is exactly as it presents itself to be, but there are certain times or places that are made to be more than what they seem to be. The secular is familiar, but the sacred is "wholly other yet wholly familiar" (Eliade 1961; Lane 1998). In other words, a heirophany is where a normal place, thing, or everyday event becomes *numinous*, an experience of the sacred for a group or an individual (Otto 1923). In this transformation, the everyday thing is no longer of direct concern. Rather, the phenomenon



of the sacred is paramount; the actual thing that manifests the sacred matters only insofar as it allows a connection to that numinosity.

Philosopher of religion Mircea Eliade found heirophany useful in explaining the experience of the sacred outside the bounds of organized religion and the need for a deity, which relates to a *theophany*. (1961) This remarkable yet informal dynamic is quite relevant for the utopic group, because the supposedly ordinary desert landscape becomes a conduit for them to develop a deep feeling of peace and renewal. That some of the utopics initially traveled to Wonder Valley on accident or on purpose is not the central point. Rather, what is significant is that something related to the numinous happened to create this unexplainable connection that influenced their decision to become residents. It is not surprising that some of the utopics described their first experience in terms of specialness and serendipity, while their subsequent return trips to Wonder Valley were like a pilgrimage.

During my research, I found that the essence of the utopics' place experience was not just the need to be in Wonder Valley because there was "something about the place," but also a drive to share or protect this inexplicable sacred experience. Since most of the utopics are of the creative class—artists, authors, architects, and designers—they imbued their work with this newly found sacred energy and in turn used their talents in two distinct ways: either to share the experience of Wonder Valley through direct or vicarious means, or to become an activist for the place to protect it from internal and outside threats. It is this sacred connection that allows Wonder Valley to be the "utopics' utopia", and it is the sharing or protecting the numinous that is at the essence of the utopic identity. Thus, the last section of this chapter focuses on how the utopics experience, share, and protect their sacred connection through art, song, the written word, and architectural and interior design.

### *The Desert Landscape*

The most recent addition to popular desert literature is the proposition that the desert is a special place where one can become more spiritual; more specifically, that the isolation and beauty of a desert landscape evokes a special sacred space. This extension of sacredness has paralleled the wider cultural trend toward the decentralization of spirituality in America (Kazantzakis 1909, 2006; Mecklin 1920; Ellwood 1994; Forman 2004). Eliade describes a sacred space as a fixed point of orientation within the chaos of a profane world; from its order, the rest of the world extends in various levels of disorder (1961). People who find a sacred place find comfort within it and use it to ease psychological strife and to understand problems outside the sacred area. Writers and scholars such as Edward Abbey (1968, 1975, 1979), Kevin Blake (1999, 2001), Richard Francaviglia (2003), Beldin Lane (1998, 2001), Barry Lopez (1976, 1988), Paul Starrs (2005), Yi-Fu Tuan (2001), and Terry Tempest Williams (1991, 2001) have all written essays exploring the inherent sacred quality of the Desert West.

In *Desert Notes*, Lopez (1976) argued that the desert has become a tempting sacred space but deep human place connections are difficult to create and maintain. He described how people seek the isolation of the desert as a way to erase ephemera to not only focus on but to find answers to their vital questions. Lopez interprets the desert as a space of stasis. He suggests that the perceived timelessness and stillness of the desert grows more attractive as the increasing noise, uncertainty, and stress of the “real world” increases. Lopez warns, however, “explanations will occur to you, seeming to clarify; but they can be a kind of trick. You will think you have a hold of the idea when you only have hold of its clothing” (1976, 12). Here, Lopez cautions that the desert has much to offer, but a large part of this offering is the mirage of easy answers.

In a similar way, writer Edward Abbey authored *Desert Solitaire*, weaves factual and fictional narratives and impassioned polemics to turn the red rocks of Southern Utah into a holy place. Abbey argues that there is nothing romantic about the desert, “this desert landscape is the indifference manifest to our presence, our absence, our coming, our staying or our going. Whether we live or die is a matter of absolutely no concern to the desert.” It is this idea that that the desert is indifferent to people, that it is so timeless gives it a type of power, to force us to reflect back onto ourselves and contemplate our meaning. In this way the desert is a sacred place because it “forces” this type of deeper understanding of ourselves, the world, and our place in it.

Abbey says elsewhere that “beauty has nothing to do with it; beauty can be found anywhere...where life is difficult it seems to acquire a higher value...thus it is austerity and emptiness—qualities which make the desert repellent to most—which make it appealing to some of us” (1973). Abbey also believes that civilization is invading this special place. “I would not consent to publicize some of the untouched or little-touched places that remain—places I love too much for my own peace of soul” (1973).

Writer Terry Tempest Williams echoes Abbey’s feelings in her *Red* (2001), that the toughness and lack of superfluous things on the landscape make all that is there more wonderful. The isolation from “other’s” civilization makes all experiences there that much more penetrating: “It’s a tough country to visit. It’s even tougher country to live in...because of the toughness those who make it see themselves as a special breed” She later writes that “the wilderness is the source of our creation and represents unlimited possibility of the human soul”, and it is the desert where a person can attach all the myth of the wilderness to an actual place.

Williams (1991) and Beldin Lane (2001) both have written books that use the suffering and eventual peace in their personal lives to parallel the suffering and peace found in the desert.

They recount the emotional stories of mothers dying of cancer and how, through this suffering, family members and the cancer patients eventually receive greater clarity and eventual peace. The authors weave tales of struggling through harsh landscapes during their mothers' tough battles. When their mothers die, Williams and Lane match this release and peace with stories of how the desert can bring both release and grace to those who have struggled through its terrain. In her epilogistic essay, *The Clan of One-Breasted Women*, Williams further details how misuse of the desert has led to great suffering. Her family lived "downwind" of nuclear surface testing sites and by the time she published the essay nine of her family members received mastectomies, seven of which lost their battle with cancer (1991). Williams includes the desert as family member—"to deny one's genealogy with the earth is to commit treason against one's soul" (2001, 288)—but this family member she has the power to save.

## **Policy**

The previous section indicated the growing importance of utopic themes in desert literature. Changes in public policy and proposed legislation also can serve as a bellwether for how a populace feels about a certain issue. For such a change in land policy to become law, it usually needs public outcry or obvious widespread support; a perceived political gain for elected officials; and some governmental bipartisan support. This process is important for bill passage, because the steady increase of protective measures for a particular landscape demonstrates that the general public assumes an increase in the value of that landscape.

From the late 1930s until the mid 1960s, the federal government focused considerable attention on how to increase dispose of the excess desert land so as to increase tax base, relieve urban population pressures, and transfer responsibility and maintenance costs to state and county

level (BLM 1980). As previously described in Chapter 3, any landscape physical or cultural landscape lacks inherent value—its economic and aesthetic worth fluctuates. Although the desert was viewed in America as a “Hell on Earth” during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, these “leftover lands” provided a backyard wilderness for Los Angeles, the continent’s second largest conurbation.

Over the past fifty years, the utilitarian view of the desert landscape continually shifted away from that of wasteland towards a fragile ecosystem in need of federal and state protection. An increased interest in environmental policy and restrictive use laws grew with the emerging environmental movement originating in northern and central California. The result has been a series of significant bills and laws that contribute to changing the identity of California’s desert landscape from a wholly dystopic wasteland to a landscape whose utopic value is both popularly understood and legally enforced.

The late 1960s were a time that witnessed a dramatic change in the public’s social and environmental consciousness. There was an increasingly popular concern for minority rights, environmental protection, and other progressive social causes. The resulting shift in public consciousness was essential for the emergence of a utopic desert. Before something can be perceived as utopian, it first must be valued by a significant number of highly motivated residents. The shift from recognition to consecration can be traced to key individuals and significant pieces of legislation.

In 1968, Russ Penny, California Bureau of Land Management director from 1966-1974, authored the first official statement valuing the desert lands as inherently important to plant and animal life and to the overall sustainability of the state’s arid biomes (Wheat 1999). This change in policy was a reaction to the apparent destruction caused by the infamous Barstow-to-Vegas

Motorcycle Race, involving thousands of participants traversing desert wilderness with little regard for plant and animal life. Public sentiment became hostile not so much because of the damage to nature, but because “outsiders” were damaging Los Angelinos’ desert backyard (Darlington 1996). Because of public uproar and Penny’s inclination towards conservation, he called for a preliminary study of California’s Mojave Desert lands. He wisely argued that no Californian could complain about damage done before there is an adequate appraisal of what is actually there and what needs protection (Wheat 1999).

Specifically, Penny’s plan called for increased public education; an exhaustive scientific inventory of flora and fauna; a desert-ranger force with effective power to enforce any new conservation laws; and the creation of traveler way stations. Penny also created an off-road vehicle advisory council, operating from 1968 to 1972, which collected data regarding the number of off-road vehicles in California’s Mojave Desert, determined what if any damage was being done, and observed and reported any injury to the physical landscape or private property (Darlington 1996). If there were any damages, an official would report its severity and consider if it could be mitigated without detriment to the residents’ personal freedoms.

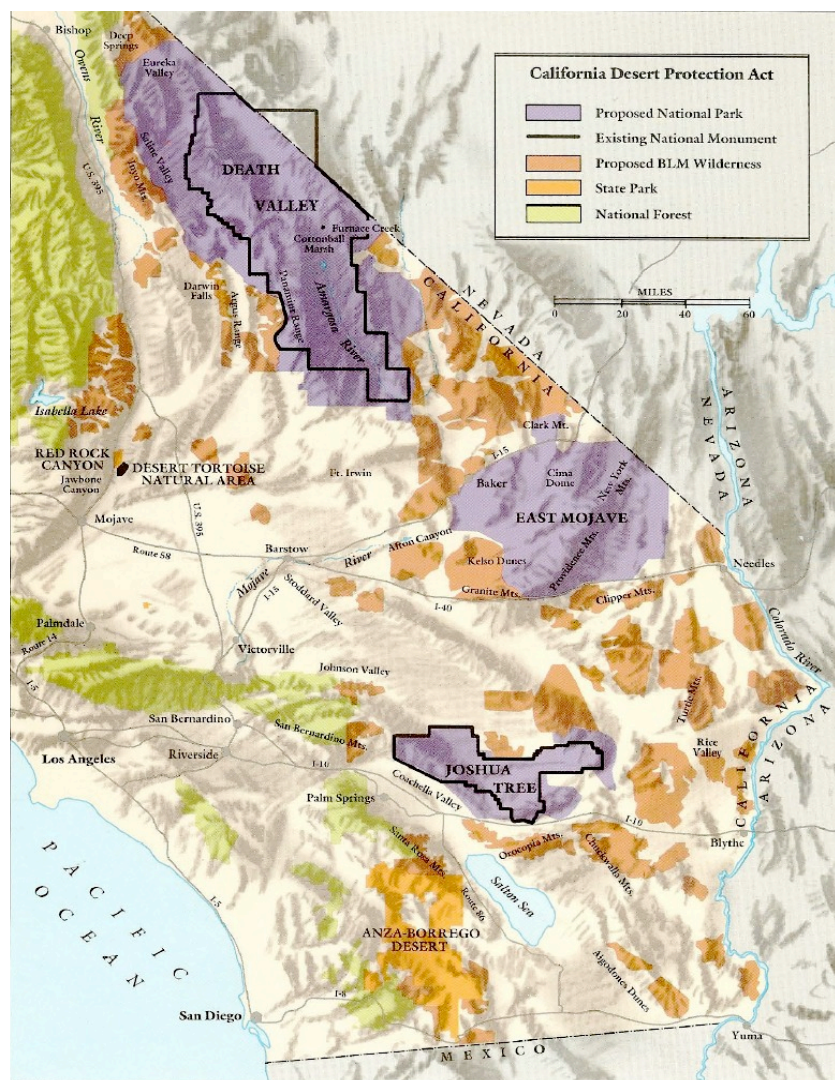
The 1970s witnessed a further increase in the need for protection of California’s desert lands and a broader concern for the nation’s environmental well-being. In 1970, the first Earth Day was celebrated and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) was passed. NEPA is a law that established a national policy promoting environmental enhancement, and is one of the first proactive environmental policy statements. NEPA established the President's Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) and required environmental assessments (EAs) and environmental impact statements (EISs) for all lands managed by the President’s cabinet. At the end of the decade, the Federal Land Policy Management Act (FLPMA) was passed into law. This act

affected the settlement, use, conservation, and preservation of the United States' public lands. The act ended the wholesale disposal of federal lands, especially for small tract homesteading.

Environmental concerns towards public land, especially on BLM acreage, received much less attention in the 1980s than in the more progressive 1960s and 1970s. Because of the lack of continued progress in strengthening environmental standards, environmental groups became increasingly active in advocacy and public policy. Although groups such as Greenpeace, Earth First, and the Sierra Club blame the weakening of environmental standards on the policies of Reagan administration, it was the growing outrage during this time that their membership rolls grew substantially (Arnold 1982; Manes 1991; Hayward 2009). Thus, the frustration from the 1980s can be seen as the seed for the advancements in environmental issues in the 1990s.

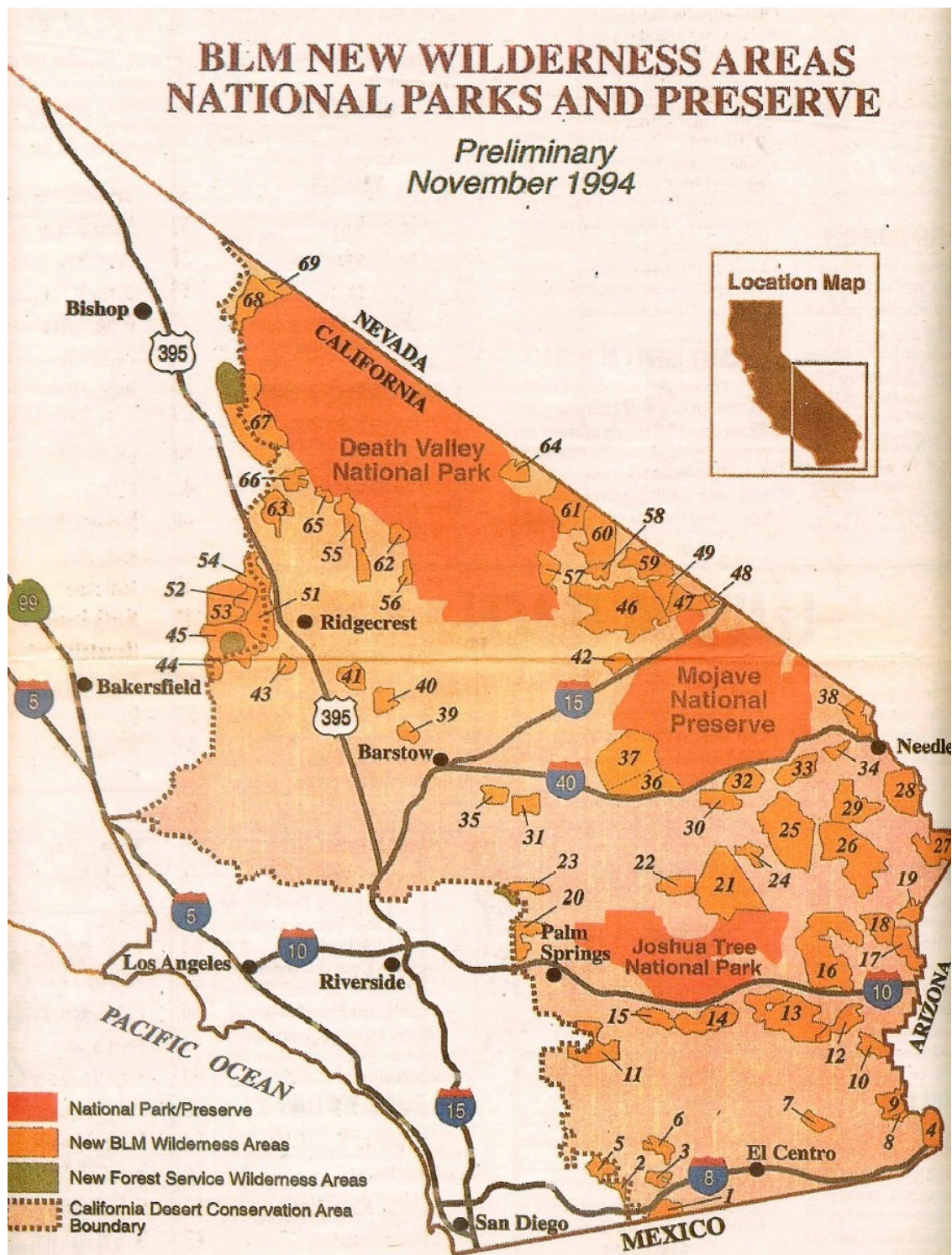
Just as the Small Tract Act of 1938 led to the homestead era in Wonder Valley and the FLPMA of 1978 led to abandonment and the escalation of Wonder Valley's dystopic population, the California Desert Protection Act (CDPA) of 1994 was the most important federal bill in terms of promoting the utopic view of the desert. The CDPA protected 7.7 million acres of BLM and NPS land in California, and, specifically, the legislation: (1) designated nearly 3.5 million acres of BLM land in the California desert as wilderness; (2) added 1.2 million acres of land to Death Valley National Monument and redesignated the monument a National Park; (3) added 234,000 acres to Joshua Tree National Monument and redesignated the area a National Park; (4) established a new 1.4 million-acre Mojave National Preserve; (5) created the Death Valley and Joshua Tree National Parks and the Mojave National Preserve; and (6) transferred 20,500 acres of Bureau of Land Management land to the State of California to expand the Red Rock Canyon State Park (figures 6.1 and 6.2) (BLM 1996).

Although the new millennium witnessed a relative lull in proactive desert policy, there have been countless public hearings and multiple lawsuits regarding amendments to the CDPA, namely, the North East Colorado Desert Management Plan (NECO) and the West Mojave Desert Management Plan (WEMO). Disagreements stem from the variations, ambiguity, and sometimes-conflicting local, state, and federal laws. The NECO and WEMO plans were crafted after a decade of research, assessment, and public interaction. Even though each is a thoughtfully created compromise between conservation, preservation, and industrial lobbies, both are still mired in partisan dispute and court appeals.



**Figure 6.1 The 1994 CDPA proposed land management changes (Map from DOI).**





**Figure 6.2 Map of the approved CDPA changes in land management (a total of sixty-nine wilderness areas (indicated by numbers), two National Parks, and one National Preserve) (Map from BLM).**

One option to quell these conflicts is to resolve the contradicting BLM, state, county, and municipal land use laws and create bipartisan benefits. Senator Diane Feinstein proposed that the best way to do this is through a new CDPA that would create bridges between state lands, federal wilderness, NPS, and BLM land management (figure 6.3). Although this plan is acceptable by most stakeholders, it has little chance of approval from the Senate Subcommittee on energy and natural resources because of the current economic recession and the fear of a public backlash against increased government spending. Most recent reports indicate that, unless it can be “piggybacked” onto a more popular and nation-wide bill, S.2321 will be tabled until the 2011 congressional session.



**Figure 6.3 Map of Senator Feinstein's Proposed 2010 CDPA (S.2921) (Map from BLM).**

## **The Utopics**

The CDPA signaled a swell in Californians' appreciation and active support for their desert lands. Interestingly, a rush to purchase desert property accompanied this new environmental awareness and preservation movement. Property near Joshua Tree National Park was especially targeted, since it featured one of the most iconic desert landscapes in the world and was the closest National Park to over 20 million people in the Los Angeles metropolitan area. This new land rush transformed Wonder Valley from a relatively unknown rural area into an ideal place to find closer communion with the latest landscape to be consecrated as a National Park (interviews with author—Davis 2007; Hoffman 2007; Merrick 2008; Stringfellow 2008). Wonder Valley experienced a dramatic increase in population and quickly evolved from a homestead landscape overrun with abandonment to the one place in California where a person could live in a rural desert landscape bounded by a National Park and National Preserve with BLM wilderness interspersed throughout.

Wonder Valley had three important attractions for utopic seekers: first, it featured isolated proximity—conveniently located near Los Angeles, but experientially far from its everyday problems; second, Wonder Valley was in the middle of a federally protected, aesthetically beautiful, and biologically significant landscape; and third, there were hundreds of unique and available cabins with virtually no code enforcement on low-priced properties expansive enough to provide privacy and isolation—As one interviewee, Perry Hoffman stated, “Wonder Valley is inexpensive inspiration” (interview with author 2007).

In the mid-1990s, individuals representative of the utopic group discovered what Hoffman had already found. Accordingly, many artists bought property and eventually asserted their more “preservationist” point-of-view as to how Wonder Valley's landscape should be

perceived and experienced. Although the utopics were the last identity group to discover and populate Wonder Valley, by 2007 it was estimated by real estate agents and county officials that the new arrivals to the community constituted about one third of the total population—approximately in numbers similar to the home owners (homesteaders) and squatters (dystopics) (interviews with author—Booker 2007; Hillyard 2007; Miller 2007; Shipley 2007; Harris 2008; Smith 2008; Stringfellow 2008). This uneasy triumvirate may have been equivalent in size of residents, but the utopics’ relative speed and scale of their arrival matched with their proclivity for community organizing and political savvy made this group inherently more powerful in policy matters than the homesteaders and dystopics. Wonder Valley’s isolation and lack of enforcing ordinances or any government directives, however, denuded any advantage the utopics appeared to possess.

Midway through fieldwork, I began to detect categorical repetition in regard to the essence or “utopicness” of the utopics. My interviews, observations, and textual materials pointed towards three intense and mutually understood utopic worldviews—(1) a belief that the land, the fauna, and the flora have inherent rights; (2) that Wonder Valley contained an unusual amount of energy, best described as sacred, that should be tapped into but must also be protected; and (3) utopics’ compulsion to use their talents to express or protect their sacred connections for the sake of personal discovery, public display, and as a source of revenue.

This “creative class” also has much stronger ties to San Francisco than Los Angeles—the largest source area for the homesteaders and dystopics (Florida 2002). For those unfamiliar with California culture and politics, the divide between southern California’s consumer pragmatism (centered in Los Angeles) and northern California’s liberal idealism (centered in San Francisco) represents one of the most extreme dichotomies of urban intrastate rivalries in the nation (Rolle

1978; Malkmus 1994). Although this rivalry is certainly not causative to Wonder Valley's homesteader and utopic divisions of identity, it would provide an interesting case study to evaluate the manifestations of the cultural divergence.

## **Sharing and Protecting Utopia**

In this last portion of Chapter 6, I utilize six profiles that provide a valuable glimpse inside the utopic lifeworld of Wonder Valley. After interviewing, observing, viewing their art, listening to their music, and exploring their rental cabins, I have found that there is a fundamental desire to “share” their utopia with others, along with an equally strong yearning to “protect” their utopia from harm or destruction. Although these two feelings are found in all the utopics I met, each seemed to focus, and in many cases make their living, on one side of the sharing/protecting continuum. Greg Davis, a landscape architect and Jeff Perry, an interior designer, both create their utopia by sharing it with others through restoring and renting cabins. Perry Hoffman, a sculptor, tile artist, photographer, and author, and the musical trio, “The Sibleys,” find their utopia strengthened by communicating and sharing the Wonder Valley experience vicariously through their art and music. Phil Klasky, a cultural geographer and professor, and Chris Carraher, a visual artist, however, are both representative of utopics who use their talents to protect their utopia from both internal and external threats.

The following section portrays six profiles of Wonder Valley utopics—the first four highlight those residents that strengthen their utopic connection to the land by sharing their experiences with others, while the last two profiles focus on residents whose utopic connections are strengthened by defending Wonder Valley from various threats. The descriptions of the six profiles follow.



***Sharing Utopia:  
Landscape Architect Greg Davis***

Greg Davis is the owner and lead designer of the Beverly Hills-based landscape and design firm, Gregory Davis and Associates (GDA). Davis founded GDA over twenty years ago for the purpose of creating “complete environments” that are “true to the energy of their place” (interview with author 2007). Davis avidly believes that places inherently hold different kinds and strengths of experiential energy that can be used or abused—especially by architects and landscape designers. Davis described how “there is a special quality of a place that can not be felt by any of the normal senses individually” (interview with author 2007). Instead, he said that the feeling “comes from beyond the senses but is enhanced by every sense...there is something in all of us that connects with it. I don’t know where it comes from or how I can feel it, but it is there...I try my best to use this [feeling] in all of my projects” (Interview with author 2007). Davis grew up in Hawaii and has always felt a strong bond between his life and the land. Davis has relied upon his philosophy of harnessing and expanding the land’s power in his Southern Californian, Hawaiian, Canadian, English, and China developments. His favorite site, however, has consistently been Wonder Valley, due to its “abundance of energy and opportunities” (interview with author 2007).

In 1997, Davis visited a friend who had just purchased property in Wonder Valley. The well-traveled Davis explained that this first experience of Wonder Valley was an “intense” but “unexplainable” bond. He described how he quickly felt a powerful connection to the place, that although patently inscribable, seemed to be accentuated when he floated in a “pool at night, naked, and while the temperature of the water, his body, and the air became one” (interview with author 2007). He explained that in such moments he reaches an apex of existence, and that this

coalescence between his body, the earth, and the sky has been possible only in a special, secret place in his native Hawaii and Wonder Valley.

Because of this powerful tie to Wonder Valley, the next year he purchased his first home, named it *Witt's End*, because the property was on Witt Road. This home became his sanctuary whenever he reached his “wits’ end.” For the next few months, he regularly returned to Wonder Valley, each time making improvements and enhancing the property so that it reflected his feelings and could be a true sanctuary. He did not want the place to feel “like a desert cabin” but instead to harness “the land’s essence by allowing the inside comfort to flow outside and letting the natural energy to flow inside from the outside” (figures 6.8 & 6.9) He stated that early on in the process he knew that he would need to share this place with others besides his friends and family. In 1998, Davis transformed Witt’s End into his first retreat. The next year he created his second company, Joshua Desert Retreats, which would deal specifically with his Wonder Valley projects.



**Figure 6.4 Davis outside of one of his rental properties (Photo by J. Emilio Flores, New York Times).**

Davis's "Witt's End" property was quickly booked through the whole year. Because of the popularity, he began to expand his vision to other sites that could provide equivalent experiences. Davis began buying properties and bringing a few of his employees to restore them and "expand each place's potential." Fourteen years later, Davis has become the largest private owner of Wonder Valley property. He currently operates thirteen rental properties and is in the process of further expansion. As of 2009, there are a total of twenty-five "official" rental properties in Wonder Valley. According to Davis, that number could easily double or triple in the next few years for three reasons: first, the recession keeps Californian vacationers closer to home; second, very few remodeled homes are selling in Wonder Valley; and third, in the past three years all properties in Wonder Valley (as well as southern California) are being increasingly devalued. These dynamics create a situation where, instead of selling, homeowners find it easier and more profitable to convert their property into a vacation rental or a traditional one-year lease.



**Figure 6.5 The JDR properties Witt's End and Rancho Mesa (Joshuadesertretreats.com).**



**Figure 6.6 Witt's End bunkhouse interior (Joshuadesertretreats.com).**





**Figure 6.7 & Figure 6.8 Exterior “rooms” at Witt’s End created to better connect to the desert (Photos from [joshuadesertretreats.com](http://joshuadesertretreats.com)).**

Davis stated that there is rarely vacancy and he could rent out fifty more properties if he had them available, but he takes on each restoration effort personally and with great care. Davis indicated that the rentals are perfect places for certain types of gatherings—e.g., relaxation and spiritual awakening, base camps for outdoor adventure, and catalysts for growing closer to your family, friends, or co-workers. The larger units are usually rented for retreats by universities (e.g., University of California, Los Angeles, University of Southern California, California Institute of Technology, Loyola Marymount University, and many others), corporations (MTV, Nokia, DreamWorks, National Geographic, The Boston Globe, Dutch Glamour Magazine, and LocationsUnlimited) and numerous religious groups (Christian, Buddhist, and Hindu) (interview with author 2007; [joshuadesertrentals.com](http://joshuadesertrentals.com) accessed 2009). Couples and small families, however, almost exclusively rent the smaller one-or two-bedroom units. Most renters stay from five to seven days, but it is not unusual for two-week or one-month boarders. The longer than average stays (industry standard is three to four days) are partially due to three-day minimum and drastically reduced rates for stays of one week or longer (interview with author 2007) (Figure 6.10).

Property	Rental Rates	
	3 Night Retreat	Weekly
Adobe	600	1,100
Desert Palms - Special Rate!	600	1,100
Godwin Ranch	750	1,300
Jackalope	600	1,100
Oasis - Special Rate!	500	900
Rancho Mesa	750	1,300
Sunny Ranch - Special Rate!	500	900
Todos Santos	600	1,100
Valle Vista	750	1,300
Wikiup	850	1,500
Witt's End	1,400	2,200
Zen-Go - Special Rate!	600	1,100

**Figure 6.9 Listing of JDR properties and prices as of 2009 (joshuadesertretreats.com).**

Although the properties are consistently profitable, Davis indicated that these cabins represent more than income because they provide personal satisfaction: “Wonder Valley gives me a chance to have total control of the design and construction, so that the cabins emerge from the desert...this desert is powerful, and this makes the cabins powerful. When people come here they have a chance to feel the energy that restores me” (interview with the author 2007). He further stated that Joshua Desert Retreats allows him to work out his feelings for the place and share the desert’s energy with people from around the world. Davis, however, was quick to add that those reasons are important but are secondary to the simple but inexplicable truth that this place gives him great satisfaction: “I come here because I am happy here. I cannot describe the feeling or explain why it is, it just is, and it feels good.” This happiness is compounded by the fact that “I know so many others can feel this energy because of my work” (interview with author 2007).

***Sharing Utopia:  
Interior designer Jeff Perry***

In 1986, Jeff Perry began designing and creating custom-made furniture using his parents' garage as a production site. His natural abilities quickly translated into orders, generating enough sales that he was able to shift operations to a larger space dedicated to retail activity in Hollywood. His store was the city's first devoted to vintage/mid-century furnishing (email correspondence 2008). Despite these simple beginnings, Perry's primary business, now entitled *Futurama Furniture*, has greatly expanded and become regionally famous. Although each furniture piece is unique, Perry has consistently stayed true to his initial concept of "a mix of straight line, classic, mid-century designs...[with] materials and accents that combine vintage with luxury" (interview with author 2009).

His unique interpretations of late 1950s and early 1960s interior design won him the contract to design and supply the furniture for AMC's critically acclaimed television series *Mad Men*. He explained how the furniture sets the period piece's neo-retro/vintage atmosphere so well that in one way it becomes one of the characters in each scene. Perry described how many of the program's fans of the show became upset when they discover that the furniture is a contemporary creation. He pointed out, however, that his furniture is the most authentic part of the show because the design, fabric type, and sometimes actual material is from that period. He described how the misplaced anger is actually a compliment because his furniture is that convincing.

Perry's attraction to an era in which he never lived stems from his fascination with the theme of juxtaposition. If done well, people are attracted to contrasting things are next to each other. The more outlandish the more interesting. I asked if that was why he liked Wonder Valley? He responded that he thought of Wonder Valley as a "designer's playground" and had

never connected the place to his underlying theme, but after a few seconds, he said, “Yes, it is there, but doesn’t really make sense for it to be next to any of the places it is next to, or really anywhere” (email coorespondance 2008).



**Figure 6.10 A couch designed by Perry in a still shot from AMC’s *Mad Men* on the left and isolated on the right. Figure created by Los Angeles Times 2009. (photograph on left by AMC, & photograph on right by Jeffrey Ross).**

Perry bought a home in Twentynine Palms in 2006. After two years, he expanded his furniture business to include “Trader Jeff’s Trading Post,” a retail establishment in Twentynine Palms that buys and sells used furniture and also sells some of Perry’s less expensive pieces. During this time two simultaneous events happened—Perry expanded his passion of furniture design to include interior design. He said that he wanted to have control of the entire space so that his furniture could “live in a holistic environment.” (interview with author 2009). Second, he discovered Wonder Valley and its abundance of abandoned cabins, or as previously noted, “a designer’s playground.”

Perry has bought and refurbished two properties, which are named “Desert Isle” and “Cowboy Hideout.” Both are vacation rentals and designed to be part of the essence of the desert, but also to be apart from the desert and the larger world. Perry’s two Wonder Valley rentals are keeping with his fixation for mid-century Americana/pop culture. When I asked if he had achieved a true holistic experience, Perry replied that he “had not achieved my dream,” but

the two Wonder Valley “properties are my closest examples of what I need to keep doing” (interview with author 2009). Perry also makes use of the nostalgic 1950s-1960s western Americana in his advertisements. As illustrated in figures 6.17- 6.22, his thoughtfully blended sense of vintage and hi-tech in the cabins gives way to an explicitly kitschy display in the advertisements for the properties.



**Figure 6.11 Interior of Desert isle**



**Figure 6.12 Exterior of Cowboy Hideout**



**Figure 6.13 B&W desert scene, Wonder Valley sign digitally added**

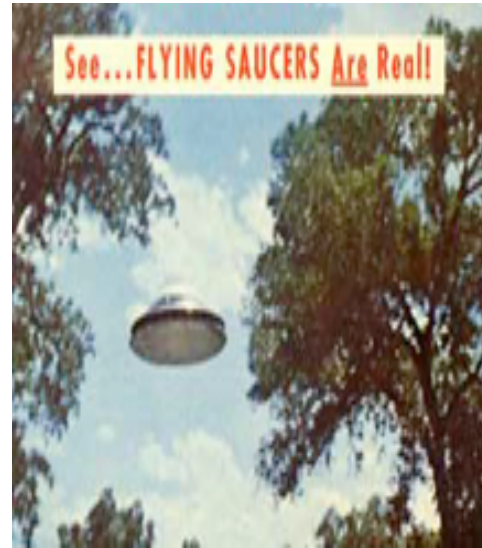


**Figure 6.14 Scene of Wonder Valley with 1960s style logo**





**Figure 6.15 1950s-styled Ad depicting family vacation in the iconic Joshua Tree N.M./N.P.**



**Figure 6.16 Campy Ed Wood-style ad evoking 1950s UFO craze**

### ***Sharing Utopia:***

#### ***Musical Group The Sibleys (Laura & James Sibley, and Thom Merrick)***

Laura and James Sibley and their mother, Mary, are the owners of The Palms, a “townie bar” on Amboy Road, and the only official commercial entity in Wonder Valley. Early in their childhood, the Sibley siblings regularly sang and played music for bar patrons. “The Sibleys” trio formed six years ago when the brother and sister duo added bass player Thom Merrick to not only be the “house band” for The Palms but also to perform at local clubs and events.

I attended two of their live performances during field research and also studied their song lyrics. I noted that although most their songs do not directly mention Wonder Valley by name, a resident or person familiar with the place definitely detects the community’s influence. In a *Los Angeles Times* article entitled *Making music in the middle of nowhere, for just about no one*, Laura Sibley described how their songs come from their Wonder Valley experiences;

We had some passers-throughers come in and say, 'Where are we going? Where are we? Where do we go next?' And we were like, 'You stay on the pavement, and you go one way or the other way. And whatever way you came from, you should probably go the other way.' And we had a new song, 'Follow the Big Black Road.' You're not lost out there," she continues. "You stay on the pavement and you won't be lost. (Los Angeles Times 2005)

Ben Vaughn, most famous as the composer for the television shows “Third Rock from the Sun” and “That 70s Show,” and as the soundtrack producer for the film “Swinger’s,” has been a Wonder Valley resident since the late 1990s and the producer for The Sibleys’ albums since then. On the Sibleys’ website ([satisfactionrecords.com](http://satisfactionrecords.com)) Vaughn described how happening upon a Sibleys’ performance at The Palms helped him decide to buy a home in Wonder Valley. Vaughn described to me that the raw and eclectic sound perfectly fit the community and also his taste in music (interview with author 2007): “They sound like where they come from.”(Los Angeles Times 2005) The Sibleys helped translate the curious power of the community into a musical language that he could understand.



**Figure 6.17 The Sibleys practicing at The Palms. Publicity photograph from [Satisfactionrecords.com](http://Satisfactionrecords.com).**

Sibleys member Thom Merrick moved to Wonder Valley in the 1990s because he was “tired of the city.” He felt he could express himself much better in the quiet of the desert. He said, however, that “the desert, especially Wonder Valley, is anything but quiet, but if it was like what I was searching for then I probably would not have stayed.” It is not the quiet that he was looking for it was meaningfulness. In the city “there is too much of not much,” here “everything is special” (interview with author 2007). In Wonder Valley he feels alive and his music and art reflect that.



**Figure 6.18 The Palms Bar and Restaurant in Wonder Valley (photograph by author).**

Although Merrick plays bass guitar in the band, he is more widely known as a visual artist. In the past twenty years his art has been featured in over 100 newspaper and magazine articles, displayed in over 150 individual and group exhibitions, and is a part of numerous public collections in the United States, Germany, Belgium, Sweden, and Liechtenstein (interview with author 2007; and discussed on [grnd0.com](http://grnd0.com)). He described how the guitar is an outlet for his emotions, but his art is more tied to his spiritual connection to the land: “Playing the guitar is a different way of getting through things... the land’s energy, the desert, is what inspires my art...some more obviously reflect that more than others” (interview with author 2007).



The one piece of his collection most closely tied to Wonder Valley is his interpretive map of the community (See figure 6.20). This map called; "Surprise, Terror, Superstition, Silence, Melancholy, Power, Strength" focuses on what he sees, where he goes, and how he feels everyday, specifically dealing with pathways, destinations, and the surrounding northern and southern mountains (Valley, Bullion, Shadow, and Sheep Hole, and Pinto). He marked an "X" on significant places in his life, such as his home, The Palms, and the airport. He described how the map "is relatively accurate in an objective sense, except for Valley Mountain...I drew the thing I see" (interview with author 2007). Valley Mountain is the principal physical landscape in Wonder Valley and becomes the focus of his map. He explained that Valley Mountain is the center not only because of its significance to the Wonder Valley experience, but also because its odd form invites interpretation: "Highlighted on the map is a twisted, jagged rock formation that I see daily on the way to my studio. The shape of the mountain looks like a beast, a dinosaur, or a great lizard."

Merrick's description of the map pushes past an imaginative rendition of Valley Mountain by using the strange landmark as a springboard to ask complex questions about Wonder Valley's environmental effect on people.

The rock stands as a reminder that creativity, a natural resource, and raw material, is best served by rude rock and the horrid graces of wilderness itself. Where do these images come from that haunt the mind? Do they burn in from nature, contrasting the sun, or drain away, outward to the land from social conditioning?

(Email correspondence with author 2007)



he moved from Los Angeles to San Francisco and quickly made his obsession of piecemeal artistry into a profession. Hoffman was especially attracted to tile work and the Eastern philosophy of rebirth. The idea of that which has been broken can be made better drove his search for damaged and discarded items—bringing them back as the centerpieces of his art. His mantra is “if I can touch it and break it, then I can make art out of it” (interview with author 2007; also quoted on [perryhoffman.com](http://perryhoffman.com)).



**Figure 6.20 Hoffman with tile art**  
([perryhoffman.com](http://perryhoffman.com))



**Figure 6.21 A view inside Tile House when it served as Hoffman’s home, art studio and gallery. (Photograph by author)**

Like Greg Davis, Hoffman also happened upon Wonder Valley by accident and quickly fell in love with it. While driving from San Francisco to a family function in Los Angeles, Hoffman took advantage of a chance to visit a friend in Joshua Tree. The day before he was to depart he and his friend went for a drive further into the desert. Once Hoffman saw the scattered cabins and natural beauty of the place he came to know as Wonder Valley, he called his family, explaining that he would be delayed for quite some time because he had “found heaven and needed to find his place in it” (interview with author 2007). Within the year, he purchased a

property tore it down, and pieced it back together. Once he declared his “Tile House” project complete, he bought another property that he restored and named “Desertwonderland.”

Although both of revamped houses first began as his dwelling, they were repurposed into an art studio, then a work of art themselves, and recently he has converted them into rental properties. In a brochure Hoffman describes what a vacationer can expect in his

*Desertwonderland* property, and by doing so Hoffman also displays his own feelings about the utopic and sacred qualities of the desert and the idea that his home can act as an axis mundi:

Cradled inside an inspiring work of art you find yourself situated in complete silence, watching desert light crawl across the vast and intricate landscape around you. You are ironically completely alone in the middle of nowhere and yet at the center of something amazing...the universe.



**Figure 6.22** Scanned copy of Hoffman’s photograph of a scorpion on one of his tile projects.



**Figure 6.23** Fountain inside tile house (Photograph by author)

Hoffman’s explained that his primary motivation is to create art representative of his utopic connection to the landscape for people to buy and take to their homes. In this way, visitors

“can live within his art” while staying in his *Tile House* or *Desertwonderland*. Hoffman, added that the occupants are able to purchase pieces of his two homes to take back to their home— “forever connecting them to the art, the place, and to the desert’s energy” (interview with author 2007).

**Protecting Utopia:  
Professor *Phil Klasky***

Phil Klasky is a Los Angeles native who completed his graduate studies at San Francisco State University and is currently a lecturer there. His master’s thesis, *An Extreme and Solemn Relationship: Native American Perspectives: Ward Valley Nuclear Dump*, not only explored the issue of environmental justice and Native American rights but was also an example of action research. (Klasky 2008). He focused his field activities and used his findings primarily to rally many stakeholder groups to oppose the siting of a nuclear-waste facility. Eventually, because of his efforts in bringing together the Colorado River Native Nations Alliance, the Ward Valley Coalition, Greenpeace, the BAN Waste Coalition, and Save Ward Valley, the Ward Valley facility was rejected. (email correspondence with author 2007) Following his master’s defense, he was hired as a lecturer for San Francisco State University’s Department of American Indian Studies, a position he currently holds.

According to my interview and his professorial statement of purpose, his research interests and activism are one in the same—collaborating with indigenous peoples to gather ethnographic information and to help protect their sacred sites from toxic waste dumps and incinerators, extraction of resources, and motorized recreation. In general, he also opposes war (figure 6.24), Western imperialism, and activities that threaten traditional culture, the environment, endangered species, and wilderness areas.

To effect change in these areas, Klasky has involved himself in many service activities. For instance, he is the coordinator of San Francisco State University's Ethnic Studies Student Resource and Empowerment Center, a member of the Sierra Club California/Nevada Desert Committee, and is the co-founder of the Bay Area Nuclear Waste Coalition, or BANWC. In 1995, BANWC successfully sued the federal government in *Desert Tortoise, et al vs. Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt*: "This decision led to the establishment of 6.5 million acres of critical habitat for the endangered Desert Tortoise" (Klasky 2009). He is also the director of The Cultural Conservancy's Storyscape Project, "dedicated to the preservation and revitalization of endangered Native American stories, songs, languages and ancestral lands" (Klasky 2009).



**Figure 6.24 Klasky during research for the Storyscape Project in the Mojave Desert (photo from philipmklasky.com).**

In his travels through California and the Mojave Desert, he first came upon Wonder Valley in 2001. He instantly wanted to know more about the place, and in the next few years,



Wonder Valley became a favored destination on his road trips. In 2004, he became so impressed with beautiful scenery and interesting culture that he purchased property to be a retreat from the urban atmosphere that he called work and home. He saw his Wonder Valley property as a place to rest, but quickly found that his supposed retreat was going to be yet another battle. What angered Klasky were the numerous off-road vehicles unacceptable noise and air pollution, destruction of plant and animal life, and frequent trespassing on his property. Holding to his manta of "Don't just agonize, organize" he founded "Citizen ORV Watch" (COW) "to tame the wild west of Wonder Valley" (interview with author 2007). The controversy stemming from this organization will be discussed in the last chapter.



**Figure 6.25 Klasky placing anti-off-road vehicle signage along restricted routes in Wonder Valley (Photograph from USA Today).**

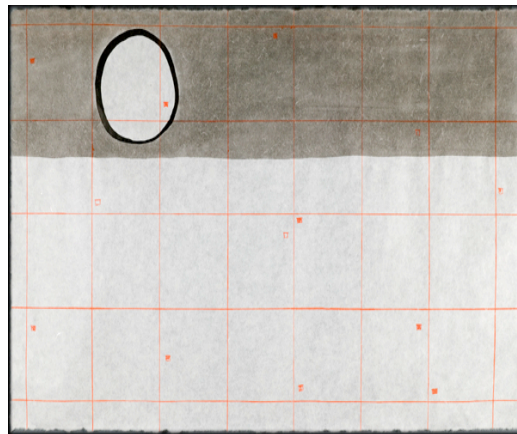
***Protecting Utopia:  
Visual Artist, Chris Carraher***

Chris Carraher is originally from Los Angeles and first encountered Wonder Valley in the early 1990s. As with most utopics she discovered the community through a friend, expected

nothing, fell in love with the place, and bought property all in the same year. Carraher is a visual artist who uses various media to create prints that deal with everyday desert topics such as the wildlife, the night sky, abandoned homesteads, and the surrounding mountains. The mood of her pieces, however, is usually pessimistic and tied to protesting “a repressive status quo.” Carraher is strongly against development, off-road vehicle, and other representations of civilization invading Wonder Valley and her home space. The majority of her work focuses on the “increasing tension surrounding and tearing apart her sacred place.”



**Figure 6.26 Chris Carraher (photograph by Kim Stringfellow 2007)**



**Figure 6.27 Cabin with Vandals. Japanese ink on *kozo-shi***

Carraher admits that she would rather create art that is more optimistic and upbeat, but she feels “surrounded by threats.” She said the tension permeating the community is from internal intimidation (off-road vehicles-figure 6.32; criminals-figure 6.33) and external fear (sprawling civilization from real estate development). In this way, Wonder Valley is both a muse and an albatross to her and her art; “I would not be who I am without this place...this desert is my sacred area...Wonder Valley is my alter.” But she also stated that, “I love it so much, but most days all I can think about are the people trying to destroy it.” She noted that she would

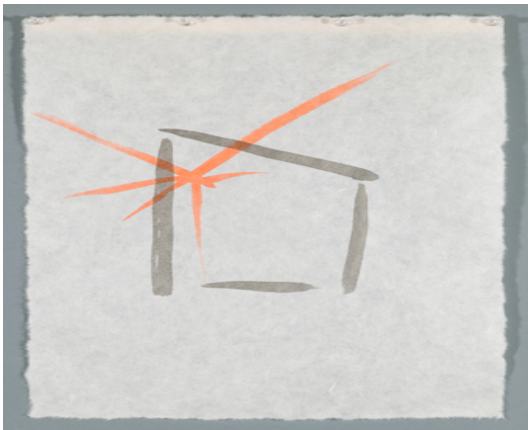


prefer creating “happy art,” but Wonder Valley is the most special place and it is under attack. She stated that “artwork, if it’s worth anything, must be honest” (2007).

She is also aware of the paradox of protesting development from a home that allows her to experience wilderness but was created by the very thing she protests:

With this piece we’re no longer viewing the homesteads as isolated objects but rather in relation to one another, as well as in relation to the desert in which they lie. And there is tension in the relationships...an artificial, right-angled grid has been imposed over an unsuitable landscape. But at the same time the grid ties us all together, wilderness, empty cabins, habited cabins. The piece holds my own sense of unease at my participation, yet nevertheless acceptance of my condition—this is my home, and my community” (2007).

Even if she treads lightly and uses her talents to protect her sacred space she knows the task before her is something that she can not overcome; “my sense of guilt and powerlessness as I fail, for reasons of my own, to help my community at this time in the face of massive external threats” (Carraher 2007).



**Figure 6.28 dirt bikes on holiday weekend.**  
Japanese ink on *kozo-shi*



**Figure 6.29 Small-Tract Homestead Act;**  
cabins; full moon; deed to my  
home. Japanese ink on *kozo-shi*

Carraher works with a variety of mediums, but during my research she was enamored with displaying the tension of Wonder Valley through Japanese ink on the thin but strong Kozo-shi paper. She explained that there are different layers on top of Wonder Valley. She said there are only a few, but they are incredibly strong. She described how each layer is a world to itself but with each additional layer the complete picture gets fuzzier yet retains its strength and becomes increasingly complicated. At the time of the interview I had the idea of an ecotone as an underlying order at the time of the interview, but Carraher's art and words supported my idea and gave substantial evidence from which to build.

## **The Sacred Landscape of the Utopics**

The preceding six profiles were not randomly chosen, nor were they meant to be an exhaustive account of Wonder Valley's utopic group. Instead, the narratives were selected to best describe how the utopics' talents were influenced by and also accentuate Wonder Valley's place identity. Every utopic interviewee described to me how the area was his or her subject, muse, and purpose. Because of this significant bond, some of the utopics were determined to share their experience with others, while others were highly motivated to protect the special qualities of their community through political and artistic activism.

Although each of these residents had their own way of demonstrating a utopic connection, they reveal one central and common bond—Wonder Valley and its environs are a part of, and contribute to their sacred landscape. In *Landscapes of the Sacred* (1998), theologian Beldin Lane describes axioms of sacred landscape, of which three relate directly to the utopics experience, there are three that directly relate to this research—(1) sacred space is not chooses; (2) a sacred landscape makes the ordinary extraordinary; and (3) a sacred place can be tread upon

without being entered. To better understand how these three axioms reflect the utopics' Wonder Valley experience, I consider each in turn.

*1. Sacred space is not chosen, it chooses.*

None of the utopics interviewed indicated that they were drawn to the community or that their initial Wonder Valley experience was the result of seeking some type of sacred experience. Instead, the utopics interviewed explained that, in one way or another, their discovery of Wonder Valley was through serendipitous circumstances. Most of the utopic accounts, including the six portrayed in this chapter, describe how they stumbled upon the community. They were not consciously looking for Wonder Valley or seeking the kind of sacred bond that the community now represents. However, the place instantly shifted from *terra incognita* to *terra sacra*.

The homesteaders by definition sought out Wonder Valley, and the dystopics were drawn to the area's advantageous geography. Every person of the utopic group, however, happened upon the community while on the way to somewhere else. Only after seeing and experiencing Wonder Valley did they connect with the place and decide to buy a parcel of land. This experience of unexpected discovery is one of the defining features of the utopic group. A related result is that utopics work to convince others of the special importance of Wonder Valley, which at first is an ordinary or even unwelcoming landscape.

*2. Ordinary space made extraordinary.*

Lane's second axiom, "the ordinary made extraordinary," refers back to what Otto (1923) and Eliade (1961) described decades ago as a kind of unseen essence. In other words, the sacred quality is an inherently personal experience that transforms ordinary places into extraordinary

experience. Every place on Earth is inherently ordinary, as it needs an individual or group to give it extraordinary meaning. Lane, noted that a landscape or specific place is not inherently good, bad, ugly, or beautiful. As experiencing beings, we make unselfconscious assessments about places based upon human evolution, experiential abilities, social situations, cultural traditions, and other factors all acting in concert.

With that said, however, there are certain landscapes that are repeatedly found in historical and contemporary circumstances to be the setting of extraordinary events. These unusual events are associated with landscapes that are extreme in some way. This combination of extreme places and extreme events are more likely to be considered sacred cross-culturally (Tuan 1977). For instance, landscapes such as mountains, deserts, and oceans are continually described as the setting of an axis mundi, struggle between gods, and places of temptation and salvation. Tuan notes that for a creation, salvation, or apocalyptic myth to prosper, it needs to be separated as far from potential adherents as possible. Placing the event in the past or placing it in an area that is difficult to reach denies the adherent the ability to evaluate the extreme claims.

What happens, however, when those extreme landscapes begin to be found and settled? The stories may or may not be debunked but the essence of the supernatural stays with the landscape. Today, there is still a focus on extreme landscapes as being better able to connect the ordinary to the extraordinary, thus becoming an axis mundi and extraordinary themselves. Wonder Valley is definitely an extreme landscape in terms of both human and physical geography. The utopics by their actions designate the place as perfection. How is it made perfect? It becomes a single space to connect the person to the unseen qualities of existence by reifying usually intangible phenomenon.

### *3. A sacred place may be tread upon without being entered*

Extreme landscapes not only conjure up supernatural connotations, but they also invite those who wish to conquer, tame, or survive these landscapes. Because of this inherent tension, it should be reiterated that the utopics I interviewed do not wish to share their place as much as they wish to share their vision of what Wonder Valley is and should be. In this way, utopics both expand their intentions and counter other competing visions. Why are there competing visions? Why are not all of the residents able to perceive the sacred qualities? This conflict stems from the fact that sacred places cannot readily be seen as they are felt, and only felt by some portions of the population. The utopics feel an extreme connection to a place that to others looks like a wasteland or just common land. This is the problem inherent with sacred places; most of them look like ordinary places to those who do not share the connection. Where the utopics see a sacred space, others see opportunities for conducting activities normally acceptable in profane or secular areas—e.g., off-road vehicle riding or illegal drug manufacturing.

## **Three Places, One Community**

This last axiom is a natural pivot from a focus on separate intensions of the three groups to potential interactions of the three groups. It is a change of perspective from looking into each group alone to looking out from the three groups in concert. The previous three chapters described what sort of people live in Wonder Valley, why they live there, and what they do and what Wonder Valley means to them. The next chapter describes how the residents interact in the common lands of the community.

Each of the utopics has a similar understanding of what Wonder Valley essentially is and what residents should or should not do. This is usually an optimal situation, except that the other

two identity groups described in Chapters 4 and 5 share the community with the utopics and have relatively homogenous intragroup intentions, but each also has radically different intergroup intentions. These three groups are not segregated into different neighborhoods; they are randomly interspersed with each other. This chapter and the two previous chapters describe the groups from the perspective of their lives within their places—their particular identities of and with their places. The following chapter builds off of these descriptions and explores the identities in concert.

## CHAPTER 7 – Ecotone



## **Uncommon Land**

The previous three chapters each focused on one of Wonder Valley's principal identity groups—homesteaders, dystopics, or utopics. These chapters investigated the reasons why the residents chose to move to Wonder Valley, clarified the essential themes that bound the identity group together, and examined how each group's particular place identity enhanced and was enhanced by the relationship with property, home, and other group members. Each resident I spoke with indicated that the land provided some situation that enhanced his or her environmental interactions and sense of dwelling within their lifeworld. For example, the homesteaders have freedom to create, maintain, and extend their worlds so that they can continuously build and improve structures and the surrounding “untamed” landscape. In contrast, the dystopics have found dwelling in spaces of abandonment, while the utopics are able to utilize their artistic talents to share or defend the beauty and sacred qualities of the desert landscape by making their homes works of art or outposts to monitor other residents' activities.

But because Wonder Valley is such an expansive setting, has such a small population, and is without formal meeting places, it is quite difficult for those of the same lifeworld to interact. Furthermore, Wonder Valley is chaotically segregated. In other words, the population is not only significantly divided spatially and experientially, but there is absolutely no order to the spatial arrangement of the groups. This makes the “common land” the only space of interaction across group affiliations and also the only space where no group has direct control. Wonder Valley's common lands include county roads, parcels of state land, BLM parcels, and land that is officially private but has been abandoned by its owners and has not yet been occupied by the dystopics.



These common areas are the centers of movement and interaction among the three groups as they surround, checkerboard, and cut through Wonder Valley. The lack of effective regulation and the attempt to regulate these spaces is pivotal to the residents' Wonder Valley experience, and thus, to their connection to and identity of Wonder Valley.

It is no surprise that each group imbues these spaces with their own intentions. So although the primary connection residents have to Wonder Valley is their place of residency, the common areas connecting and dispersed in between the community is crucial in understanding the resident's connection to and identity with the community. While the previous chapters described the three identities' contrasting spaces of control that are so very different from each other, here I emphasize the greatly varying intentions for the landscape, activities, and meaning associated with the common lands. Just as people project expectations on how others should think and act, the identity groups assume that the neutral common land should reflect their personal lifestyle and intentions for Wonder Valley.

## **Existential Ecotone**

The landscape and activities of the residents present a clear picture of a community composed of private property divided into three different place identity groupings. The diversity and intensity of the groups' conflicting interactions creates a seemingly chaotic community identity that I contend is a product of an underlying order—where the three place identities overlap and create what I term an *existential ecotone*, or a place whose fundamental essence is the overlapping of place identities. I posit that this concept describes and helps to better understand Wonder Valley's seemingly chaotic place identity.

Delineating the lifeworld of the residents was an essential part in understanding the place identity of Wonder Valley, but, it is the random distribution of the private property and thus the three identity groups across the valley that give rise to the ecotone. This randomness is the result of six factors. First, I never met nor was I given an example of a person born or raised in Wonder Valley. Wonder Valley residents are there because of the central motivating factor of the ability to make the place what they want or need it to be, and the landscape reflects this phenomenon. The residents are there not by coincidence or birth but by choice—a purposeful and methodical construction of dwelling. Second, the community is almost 180 square miles with a population of some 1,000. The properties are simply too spread out to make creating neighborhoods an easy or even possible venture. Third, the land was dispersed through direct sale and auction in a short period of time and in large-lot sizes (2.5 to 5 acres) so that neighbors were not only few and far between, but many times were strangers to each other.

Social bonds and prejudices could not develop during the founding of Wonder Valley as thousands of properties were created in only a few years' time. Fourth, many of the residents live in the community for only part of the year; this makes social ties difficult to create and sustain, especially with people sharing nothing in common. Fifth, the abandonment that quickly followed initial settlement was spatially random, so any properties that became available in the later years were the result of individual decisions, not group behavior, and were spatially scattered so new buyers were usually not spatially adjacent. Sixth, in 1976, FLPMA ended the Small Tract Act, and thus halted the disposal of federal lands to private citizens for the purpose of homesteading. This meant that Wonder Valley would have its random mixture of public and private lots indefinitely. Although forty-five percent of California is government land, that percentage is rarely demonstrated on the community scale and never in such a random dispersal. The unique

situation makes it impossible to create a contiguous neighborhood in Wonder Valley, let alone a homogenous one that could be considered homesteader, dystopic, or utopic.

This chaotic segregation is crucial for understanding Wonder Valley's ecotone identity and the importance of the commons. The highly random nature of the groups' spatial dispersal creates an important experiential dynamic: first, those that you are close to socially are not usually spatially adjacent to your property; second, the necessity to travel through or near your neighbors' property to reach fellow identity group members. Although residents each have an island of control, they all need to cross a sea of sand to reach each other's island.

Coupled with the chaotic distribution is an added layer of confusion. Because of the desert landscape and relative lack of enforcement, the common land is also ambiguous in form and function. While the previous chapters described the three identities' contrasting spaces of control that are so very different from each other, here I emphasize the landscape, activities, and meaning associated with the common lands. In the same way that people project expectations on how others should think and act, each identity group assumes that the neutral common land should reflect their personal lifestyle and intentions for Wonder Valley.

### ***Threshold***

Just as Relph's conceptual language of insideness and outsideness structured the descriptions and explanations of the residents' general experience of dwelling, the concept of "threshold" aids in understanding the residents' experience of the common land and the morphology of the ecotone. The intentions for and interactions within these common areas reveal how the residents understand and experience the totality of the community. There is no angst in the fact that a threshold experience exists in the community, as each group depends upon its

existence to enhance their sense of dwelling. There is, however, great conflict among the groups as to what exactly the threshold's purpose happens to be, with the differences emanating from each group's particular lifeworld.

"Threshold" can be defined as an area of entry and departure, a liminal space, and a buffer zone. (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1989). Mugurauer (1993), Sibley (1992), and Beckham's (2004) research on the experiential importance of the porch as a threshold exemplifies these three subtle differences of the definition—first, portraying the porch as an area allowing and inviting movement between the inner and outer spheres of a home; second, describing how the focus on movement between opposing spaces invites movement and lingering, it is not a space to dwell, which thus establishes the porch as a liminal space; and third, the porch also creates a buffer zone between public and private space, creating an additional barrier that must be crossed to enter into one's home. These three aspects of the porch (movement of entry/departure, liminality, and buffer zone) not only reflect the three primary definitions of a threshold, but also characterize the manner in which the three identity groups utilize Wonder Valley's common lands.

The homesteaders perceive and use the common spaces as areas of movement—places that allow departure from civilized space to wilderness areas, and also act as points of entry to other homestead properties. The homesteaders interpret the threshold as a space of movement in between their home and their destination. The common lands become spaces that are created or maintained by humans, and to be utilized in a way that highlights the spaces' utilitarian possibilities. The land is imbued with practicality and usually associated with movement. Some common places become destinations, but even then the theme of movement is highlighted.

Although some common places may be destinations they are sought out for extreme movement—i.e, off-road vehicle use and hunting.

Liminality emerges from the primary definition of threshold—literally meaning to “withstand or maintain while being trampled upon” (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1989), derived from the middle ages relating to the wood or stone beneath a home’s front door. This is also a fitting definition for the dystopic identity group. The liminal threshold is one of anxiety, danger, and outsideness. Liminality has a decidedly hostile edge with underlying feelings of separation and alienation. Liminality, in these cases, is dystopic in nature, since these liminal spaces are indicative of movement where people are on their way to some place else and thus have neither the comfort of at-homeness, nor the pleasure of being within a desired destination or a place that they have affection towards. These spaces of movement dramatically increase feelings of anxiousness and anger—drivers more readily engage in aggressive actions towards one another on roadways and in parking lots than if they were in a more rest-oriented environment. Doors, windows, shutters, warning sign, alarms, locks, and weaponry guard and mark these liminal areas. Aggression and anxiety are typical in these liminal situations—exemplified in the emotional debate and frequent acts of aggression and violence witnessed in Wonder Valley’s commons.

The utopics understand the common lands—the roads, interspersed government land, and abandoned homesteads—as buffer zones that allow careful interaction between their homes and “nature” acting as the last barriers between an invading civilization and a delicate and sacred desert wilderness. The closer to the natural ideal that the common lands remain, the less of a barrier there is between them and nature and at the same time a greater barrier to protect nature. The common land is partially sacred because it has plants and animals within it that are representative of the sacred parts of the desert. The utopics see civilization as still a destructive

force in these areas. In this sense, the common lands are like the shell surrounding their sacred lands, and created to take a substantial amount of abuse to protect what is inside. Too much use can break it.

The ambiguity of intentions for the common lands is a symptom of the ecotonal character of the community as it further manifests in an increased tension creating a delicate balance of intentions. The following sections provide examples of the increased tension and the delicate balance that the ambiguity and overlap of varying identity groups creates.

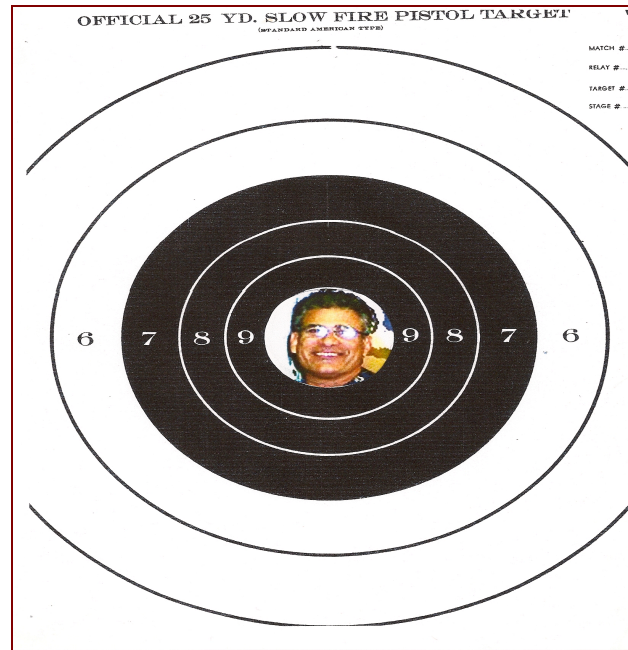
### ***Tension***

The capriciousness of the laws and ordinances concerning what activities a resident can or can not carry out in the public spaces that surround, cut through, and checkerboard Wonder Valley continue to incite anger, distrust, and violence among Wonder Valley residents. For the past decade, conflict over off-road vehicle usage in Wonder Valley's common land has created a growing tension between the community's three identity groups (figures 7.1, 7.2, 7.6, and 7.7).

Before the mid 1990s, off-road-vehicle use was one of the most common means of transportation through Wonder Valley's extensive but primitive roads and trail systems. Reflecting back to when she and her husband first built their cabin and moved to the community, Margaret Huffington stated that, although the vehicles were for everyday travel and chores, she said that they also did a great deal of recreational driving along the trails behind Valley Mountain (Figures 7.4 and 7.5) (interview with author, 2006). Wonder Valley resident Joe Ostrander described how he and his family's property would not exist without off-road vehicles: "we need the "quads" to do maintenance and get from place to place. Without all these machines, we couldn't make it out here, and there wouldn't be a Wonder Valley" (interview with author 2006).



**Figure 7.1 Warning signage common outside utopics' property (photograph by author).**



**Figure 7.2 A pistol target distributed among some homesteader and dystopic residents displeased with the COWs stance on off-road vehicle use.**

Off-road vehicles still provide an important and popular form of transportation to the homesteaders and some of the dystopics. Although common, there are three significant reasons why they are not as pervasive a presence as they were in Wonder Valley's first few decades. First, some of the road ways are now maintained well enough for automobile traffic; second, the

costs to purchase, insure, and maintain the vehicles have substantially increased; and third, recent changes in federal, state, and county laws have intermittently reduced or prohibited off-road vehicle access to Wonder Valley's common lands.

Currently, the utility "quad," a one-to-two person four-wheeled off-road vehicle, is the most popular (Figure 7.3). Quads allow for power to overcome some of the steeper passes, offer the agility to maneuver uneven surfaces, and provide the speed when traveling through the wash and over well-maintained roads. "Dirt bike" off-road motorcycles are less common but more agile and capable of higher-speeds. They are the loudest of the off-road vehicles and are almost exclusively owned and ridden by teenagers and young adults. "Trikes," or three-wheeled off-road vehicles, were commonly seen in Wonder Valley in the 1980s and early 1990s but have become increasingly rare due to instability—resulting in injuries experienced while riding over uneven or steep trails.

The homesteaders most often use quads for every-day chores, since the bikes are able to store a great deal of equipment, are reliable, stable, and easy for older residents to maneuver. Several homesteaders described how they use quads to dispose of garbage, travel to the cabins of friends and family, and do "yard work"—dragging the area around the house, driveway upkeep, and gardening. Some of the first-and second-generation homesteaders are now reaching an age where they cannot drive a car or walk to the neighbor's house, but the quads (with automatic transmission) are simple enough for elderly to stay active and retain social ties. Most of the time, off-road vehicle users will stay on the roads or paths that provide shortcuts, but during holidays many homesteaders host parties in which teens and young adults ride throughout the valley for recreation. The trails within and around Valley Mountain are especially popular with younger riders, and their riding in groups has been especially troubling for the utopic group.





**Figures 7.3 Homesteader quads are multi-use and are customized to carry numerous tools and other necessities (photograph by author).**



**Figure 7.4 “Quad” following a trail on the northern side of Valley Mountain (photograph by author).**



**Figure 7.5 Aerial view of red highlighted area in figure 7.6. Note the many off-road vehicle trails within Valley Mountain (Google Earth©).**

Unlike the homesteaders who use their off-road vehicles primarily for neighboring, landscaping, and recreation, dystopics utilize them for transportation of illegal drugs, property theft, and as their principal transportation resource. They use off-road vehicles for quick and concealed travel bypassing major roads for any one of the numerous paths winding around and through Wonder Valley. According to San Bernardino police officer Jeremy Harris, the drug runners conduct their activities at night. Harris explained that, because of their elaborate distribution systems and unlimited amounts of money from criminal backers, these dystopics make use of night vision headgear, GPS systems, and special noise-reducing exhaust systems (interviews with author 2007).

The dystopics also use off-road vehicles to aid in property theft and home invasion. According to Turner and Harris, unlike their better-funded drug runners, these dystopics ride

older and slower off-road vehicles that are rarely modified for speed or silence (interview with author 2007). Harris described how the thieves use these bikes during the day to “survey the homes.” After they have located a target, the thieves return on off-road vehicles at night to break into the vacated homes. Off-road vehicles are also used by squatters for their basic transportation needs. Bill Hillyard has studied the life of Wonder Valley squatters and although operating an off-road vehicle without license and insurance is just as illegal as doing so with a car or truck, it is virtually impossible for a police cruiser to chase, confront, or capture an off-road vehicle when it goes inside the extensive creosote brush blanketing the valley.

The homesteaders and dystopics use their off-road vehicles in different ways, but both take advantage of their day-to-day utility. The emergence of the utopics, however, marks the point when the free reign of off-road vehicles begins to come to an end. During the past decade, off-road vehicles went from being used by virtually everyone everyday to being effectively outlawed. By the early 2000s, the utopic population grew so quickly that it transformed Wonder Valley from a homesteader and dystopic community into the tripartite of identities that exist today. Wonder Valley resident Richard Daniels explained that within a year he went from not even thinking about his off-road vehicle as a controversial issue, to not being able to legally ride it.

Wonder Valley utopics were upset with what they saw as abuse of the wash, BLM wilderness, and land around Valley Mountain stemming from a general lack of regulations or enforcement of existing laws and ordinances concerning off-road vehicles (interviews with author—Hueston 2007; Carraher 2007, 2008; Klasky 2007). To remedy the situation, approximately one dozen residents in 2004 organized the Citizens ORV Watch (COW), with Phil Klasky as initial founder and first president of the organization. An early statement from Klasky

on behalf of COW gave a clear appraisal of how COW and ultimately most of the utopics viewed off-road vehicles, their riders, and their impact on the land:

The modern off-road vehicle is a powerful, potentially very dangerous machine. It can turn from a tool of recreation into a weapon of menace and destruction in an instant, with no mechanical modification necessary, depending only on the intent of the rider. The ORV outlaw may, at will, use their vehicle as a weapon to destroy land, vegetation, and wildlife and also as a weapon to intimidate, menace, or even injure members of the public, and once the injury is done use the very same instrument to flee the scene, knowing the likelihood of their being caught is extremely remote. I was having to deal with trespass more and more often, and with increasing frequency having my sleep and other normal life activities disrupted by the howl of revving engines tearing across my land or nearby BLM land (Klasky 2006).

Every utopic I spoke with was also a member of COW or sympathetic to their cause, whereas every homesteader I spoke with had negative feelings towards COW's agenda. One homesteader stated that he did not dislike COW members because of their concern over property rights, but stated that he would respect COW if it were truly made up of people who "care about the community instead of power. They pick and chose environmental and social issues to create a debate where they can then counter themselves from the menacing evil ORV criminal. This expands their membership and their power" (email correspondence with author). On the other hand there are those who hold intense hatred for Klasky and the COW members. A homesteader who wished to remain anonymous wrote, "Mr. Klasky should feel lucky that he is alive and his house is still standing. If we were the horrible criminals he paints us, then he would have been taken care of a long time ago." (email correspondence with author).



**Figures 7.6 and 7.7 COW logo and example of Anti-COW logo.**

The first piece of legislation affecting off-road vehicle use in Wonder Valley was the BLMs Western Mojave Plan (WEMO). WEMO is a multijurisdictional report on the state of California’s desert land investigating and evaluating, the stakeholders, their current uses, the spatial variations and intensity of the use, and the impact on at-risk flora and fauna of the region. The plan’s main purpose was to evaluate if the current situation in the western Mojave Desert was in the best interest of both the fragile desert habitat and Californians’ ability to utilize the desert lands. It balanced its impact to keep the preservation, conservation, and intensive-use-minded stakeholders relatively content. A portion of the plan, however, formalized the legality of off-road vehicle use on BLM lands that interspersed with private land—places like Wonder Valley, and areas such as the wash and Valley Mountain. This development obviously angered COW members as well as many other state and national environmental groups. This “pro-ORV” portion of the plan motivated COW to battle the WEMO by utilizing grass roots activism and the court system.

Later in the same year, COW received a grant to pay for local ordinance officers to monitor off-road vehicle violations. At the time, the passing of San Bernardino county ordinance #3973 called for severe limitations of any off-road vehicle use in all of San Bernardino County.



This, of course, was met with retaliation from the homesteaders through intimidation and violence.

In the last few years, there has been a steady weakening of the ordinance, and the BLM allowed off-road vehicles to ride in and around wash areas under BLM. The county sheriff's department stopped responding to calls of off-road vehicles being ridden on Wonder Valley roads, because they do not consider the roads in Wonder Valley to be highways or maintained by the county so off-highway vehicles and other non-street legal vehicles were allowed to ride on any of these "roads." In 2007, the BLM announced that Wonder Valley residents could also ride off-road vehicles on BLM roads, trails, washes, and all other federal land not specifically prohibiting such use.



**Figure 7.8 Rock boundary restricting ORV use (photograph by author).**

The weakening of the ordinance led COW members to believe that their voice was no longer being heard on the county level, so on June 5, 2008<sup>4</sup> COW joined other regional, state, and national environmental groups in a Senate hearing on off-road vehicle usage on public lands. Klasky testified before the full U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural resources. He explained that his “home and peace and quiet is constantly invaded by off-road vehicles (ORV)s resulting in damage to my property and impacting my quality of life.” He continued that his case was not random, but representative:

Every holiday weekend we have to suffer the illegal activities of hundreds of ORVs acting illegally and creating a nuisance with excessive dust and noise and trespass on private and public lands...I cannot exaggerate the impact of hoards of ORVs, trailered out from urban areas to our rural communities, and wreaking havoc on our neighborhoods, property, businesses, roads and flood control infrastructure.



**Figure 7.9 One of the many signs put up by COW to educate and deter off-road vehicle use in the wash (photograph by author).**

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<sup>4</sup> Can be accessed at: [energy.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?FuseAction=Hearings.Hearing&Hearing\\_ID=ca2e6111-befb-b64a-8a55-3945b88b484e](http://energy.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?FuseAction=Hearings.Hearing&Hearing_ID=ca2e6111-befb-b64a-8a55-3945b88b484e)

In late 2008, the county commissioners were also inundated with hundreds of letters, phone calls, and emails complaining about off-road vehicle damage to public land in Wonder Valley. In the beginning of 2009, the county commission, in conjunction with the state and federal BLM officials, created a public safety team (consisting of BLM officials, State Park officials, members of the San Bernardino Sheriff's Department, and San Bernardino County Code Enforcement). Their responsibility was to gather information about the different stakeholders in Wonder Valley and to assess the damage caused by the off-road vehicles.

The team held meetings with residents of Wonder Valley to determine the scale of damage and to find solutions to the off-road vehicle problem. In two of the scheduled meetings, local residents provided photos and documentation to illustrate the damage caused by off-road vehicles. The group then drove to two of the damaged areas to see first hand evidence. The team reported, "No recent vehicle tracks were seen except on existing roads" (BLM 2009). While in Wonder Valley, the team also conducted "impromptu" meetings with several residents. "The residents stated that the complaints are exaggerations and that they would like to continue to operate OHVs on existing roads" (BLM 2009).

When the team conducted the next meeting with the concerned residents and told them of the lack of damage, the residents told the team that President's Day weekend is the busiest time of the year for off-road vehicle traffic and destruction of property—declaring it to be "so noisy and dusty that they were unable to stay in Wonder Valley during that weekend" (BLM 2009). To see the extent of destruction first hand and make any necessary arrests, the team conducted surveillance on Presidents day weekend (February 14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup>), when five additional State Park Peace Officers joined the team to provide additional public safety coverage. During the first day the team found that "The weather was ideal for OHV recreation. It had rained the day before, so



there was no visible airborne dust. It was clear and cool with minimal wind...The officers focused on the areas around the homes and business of the reporting parties...Officers were in the area for about ten hours on Saturday, February 14...They neither encountered nor saw any people riding off-road vehicles anywhere in Wonder Valley. To double-check the lack “off-roading,” one officer checked the area on the morning of February 15<sup>th</sup>.

Off-Road Vehicles		
Group	Relationship with Off-Road Vehicles	Explanation of Relationship
Homesteaders	Practical	Use off-road vehicles for everyday activities, transportation, socializing, landscaping, and recreation. Support local deregulation and federal oversight.
Dystopics	Practical	Drug producers, larcenists, and squatters rely on off-road vehicles as a means of transportation. Patently do not get involved in policy. Continue to use off-road vehicles regardless of the regulations that are in place.
Utopics	Antagonistic	Oppose any ordinance or law that supports or expands ORV use. Morally oppose any ORV use in general. Lobby all levels of government, and support local regulations severely limiting ORV use.

**Table 7.1 Off-road vehicle use by group.**

The team recommended that because of no actual evidence of an off-road vehicle threat that the county and state and federal government should relax restrictions on off-road vehicles use in Wonder Valley and other rural areas in the Morongo Valley portion of San Bernardino County. COW members and other utopic residents objected to the findings, indicating that more studies should be carried out before any official judgment is made. Since the team's findings there have been new ordinances, and laws followed by injunctions against implementing those ordinances and laws.

Currently the situation has regained a temporary equilibrium. The time of "ride anywhere" does not look like it will return for the homesteaders, and the time of "ride nowhere" also looks doubtful to be put in place for the utopics. All the while these two groups have been in conflict, the same land they are fighting for control over is being used by the dystopics some of whom break the law everyday. Table 7.1 describes the general role of, and relationship with off-road vehicles for each group.

### ***Delicate Balance***

In a landscape with such ambiguous boundaries, abandoned homestead structures serve as distinctive markers for the places not in the complete control of any of Wonder Valley's three groups. These deserted cabins are the flags for neutral territory. Nature abhors a vacuum, and all three groups have consistently filled in Wonder Valley's neutral spaces with their own intentions. The homesteaders see the abandoned properties as a source for potential materials for use at their own homestead. The dystopics know the space as an illegal dwelling place or a concealed area to produce and store illegal drugs. The utopics categorize the vacant properties either as cluttering the natural landscape or as historical structures needing official protection.

Each group has laid claim to the abandoned land in some way, be it as a resource, a home, or an emotional connection. In this way, these abandoned homesteads provide a space for the three different worlds to interact without being patently in opposition to one another. Their own property allows each Wonder Valley group to exercise their desires to create whatever they wish within their budget, while the abandoned spaces are held in a delicate balance between the three groups—a balance that was almost destroyed in 1999 with the county’s “Shack Attack” initiative.

No one knows exactly how many homestead cabins were built during the boom of the 1950s and 1960s, or how many are abandoned but still standing. Estimates by residents, real estate agents, and government officials range wildly from a few hundred to over 2,000 (interviews with author—Dube 2007; Stringfellow 2008; Hillyard 2009). Randy Rogers, San Bernardino County code enforcement officer, stated that there are numerous problems with estimating the number of abandoned properties, particularly the immensity of Wonder Valley’s area and difficult terrain, the difficulty in contacting the legal owner via tax records, the high cost of enforcing codes versus the low financial return, the ongoing problems with the county and state budgets, and the “failure of shack attack” (interview with author 2008).

Up until the late 1990s the status quo seemed to be held in a delicate balance, as dystopics usually paid no mind to homesteaders, who in turn avoided the dystopics. At first the utopics and homesteaders also kept to themselves. late 1990s when county officials made a decision to begin tearing down all abandoned structures. The county received a large grant to improve the landscape and security of Wonder Valley, and began the initiative “Shack Attack” (SA).

In 1999, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development awarded a one-half-million dollar grant to the State of California and San Bernardino County to improve the aesthetics and safety of Wonder Valley for its residents. With this grant, the state and county governments initiated SA, consisting of two separate parts. First, a team of government officials surveyed the area and generated a list of the properties abandoned or in disrepair. Listed owners of these properties were then sent a letter asking that structures be voluntarily improved or demolished. To be compliant with state law, the property owners who wished to demolish any structure would need to hire special contractors licensed to deal with hazardous materials. Although this would cost a thousand dollars or more, it would also lower the owner's tax bill by reclassifying the property as unimproved (Marcum 1999). Second, if an owner did not comply, the property was condemned and licensed contractors hired by the state would demolish the structure for \$3,000 to \$8,000 per structure. The state would then send the bill for these costs (plus a \$600 administrative cost) to the listed property owner (Marcum 1999).

It seemed like a solution to rid the area of abandoned structures, squatters, and drug manufacturing. The plan, however, was inherently flawed for three reasons: first, most of the information about the last known owner of a vacant property was terribly outdated so most listed owners were impossible to find; second, the cost of the operation was severely underestimated because the administrators had not accounted for the extreme weather conditions, the remoteness of Wonder Valley, the unexpected amounts of hazardous materials, and the lack of any revenue from landowners that they could not locate; and third, for varying reasons, most of the residents of Wonder Valley were opposed to SA.

In the end, Shack Attack was considered a failure. Due to a dwindling amount of available funds, and the strong local opposition, just over 100 of the structures closest to the

major thoroughfares (Amboy Road and Highway 62) were destroyed and disposed of (Martin 2004). To the residents it could be seen as a victory, as it demonstrated how incredibly expensive and difficult it would be for outside influences to change Wonder Valley into a more conventional residential landscape. The reasons behind the opposition also shed light on the different ways the utopics, dystopics, and homesteaders identify with the abandoned homesteads.

Perry Hoffman and Ellie Greenwood, Wonder Valley residents and representative of the utopic group, explained that, while tearing down some of the cabins was necessary, SA was too vague in its criteria for which homesteads were to be chosen. Greenwood pointed out that many artists felt this way, and when they protested the program they were labeled as anti-development. Greenwood said that she is “not anti-development,” but is “anti-destruction of Wonder Valley” (interview with author 2007). She continued: “development is a great thing in general, but we need to ask in what way are they developing, is it the development of the human potential or the development of more efficient ways to feed the world, or is it building things just to build them?” (interview with author 2007). Hoffman stated that “development [results] in an increase in the quality of life. Growth can be development, but most of the time it is an excuse for greed” (interview with author 2007).

Hoffman described how he buys homes one at a time and tries to make them amplify the desert’s power and make the community more interesting: “Very rarely do outsiders who have never been to a place or know about it make good decisions for the people there. We are labeled as anti-development or pro-shack...they set up a ‘strawman argument’ that we can’t win” (interview with author 2007). Greenwood explained that this is why “we created our own argument, we are pro-Wonder Valley, and those properties should be protected because

Many of the artists who come to Wonder Valley did so with the idea that the “historic” homesteads would remain. Carraher loves the new popularity of desert homesteads being a focus for artists: “so long as we could not ‘picture’ them we could not ‘see’ them, and they could be dismissed and destroyed. Without visualizing our community character there was ‘nothing’ to be lost, or saved” (Carraher 2009). Carraher explained that she could understand people’s aversion towards abandonment. She stated that people may not like vacant cabins for numerous reasons: “shame and class anxiety; an ignorance of their place in history; a rejection of their very existence as an intrusion upon the desert as idyllic nature; or maybe just a dismissal of the possibility of any aesthetic appeal. They are pretty humble architecturally” (Carraher 2009).

Almost every resident I spoke to about SA described how outside interests do not respect the community but they only see wasted potential in Wonder Valley. Homesteader Gene Ostrander stated: “they get rid of the shacks, at our expense for their gain. I cannot believe that they would go through all this trouble to force “druggies” and squatters out of Wonder Valley and into their cities....It does not add up” (interview with author 2006).

Pat Flanagan, Marketing Director of the Twentynine Palms Chamber of Commerce, believed that the abandoned cabins “are eyesores,” “dangerous,” and “give a bad image to the area,” which then leads to a problem for economic development (Martin 2004). Vance Turner, homesteader and private security officer, first came to Wonder Valley over forty years ago, and believes that the abandoned shacks are not beautiful but “do not really attract too many bad people.” What he objects to is county money being wasted by needlessly tearing down harmless structures. He said that “millions of tax payer dollars went into tearing just a few of them down. I would hate to think how much it would take to clear them all out” (interview with author 2006). He said, “You are not living in a suburban neighborhood you are living in the desert...the desert

is a tough place and some don't make it...seeing those abandoned shacks and then looking at your own home you realize you have made it" (interview with author 2006).

Homesteaders have indicated that the utopics may be worse than the developers because the utopics want tax dollars to tear down the "ugly ones" and tax dollars to preserve the "pretty ones." Turner stated, "these abandoned houses used to look like normal cabins back in the day, but they don't now, the people who stayed put time and money into their place, while these old cabins show that a bunch of people couldn't take the heat" (interview with author 2006).

Homesteader James Alexander explained, " my house looked like that [gesturing towards an abandoned cabin] but I stayed and made it better, now it is on the market for \$150,000. If you showed a buyer one of those what do you think he would offer? Not much if anything." He continued: "The liberals out here want to save them on my dime, but not all of [homesteads], just the ones, away from their place...they can't wait to tear down [the structures] that don't fit their picture of what a cabin should be" (interview with author 2007). I asked if he thought the abandoned homesteads lowered the price he was asking for his house or the chances of selling it. He said that he did not think the abandonment diminished home sales because "there is still the same number of cabins and the selling prices keep increasing" (interview with author 2007)

Allen Carter described how he sees "[utopics] out there taking pictures of them and selling paintings of them in town." He added, "I bet they don't go down to skid row and paint. That's what these are—Wonder Valley's skid row." I asked if he would like them torn down and he explained that "The kids have fun in the two down the road, and I suppose there are drug makers and gangs using them too, but Wonder Valley is a big place...they never will get rid of crime in this place, they should use that money for another fire station or better roads. That is what would make my life easier" (interview with author 2007).

Every resident representative of the homesteader identity I spoke with indicated that they are ambivalent about Wonder Valley's abandoned homesteads and do not care enough one way or another to fund their removal or preservation. For example, Janet Baker said, "they think that they are trying to save Wonder Valley when they save them, but that's not Wonder Valley. Wonder Valley is about letting people and things be by themselves" (interview with author 2007).

Homesteaders Alexander and Ostrander explained how, if a cabin becomes a problem, they just tear it down themselves. Ostrander described how a group of squatters moved into a nearby abandoned structure: "They drove in on a car that hardly ran but played loud music all the time...things started going missing from the garage right after they moved in. So [we] waited for their car to leave and then we went down there with the tractor and tore it down." He described how the demolition process lasted about an hour and only cost them a few dollars for fuel for the tractor and for the bonfire: "we never saw them again" (interview with author 2007).

Squatters Kelly and Jack Benson said that it is the abandoned structures that brought them to the area in the first place and that they relied upon abandoned property to live in Wonder Valley. Bill Hillyard, local expert on the squatter population, agreed with the Benson's assessment: "if they removed the shacks, they would be replaced with vacation homes built to all look the same and Wonder Valley would not be here anymore" (interview with author 2008). He continued: "The open space allows Wonder Valley to be Wonder Valley. Without it there would be no intrigue...[and] no one could ride dirt bikes and what would the artists paint?" (interview with author 2008). He indicated that the many squatters would not be able to stay if they lost their homes. I asked Hillyard where he thought they would go? He said he did not know, but



assumed that “probably back “down below” [colloquial for the Los Angeles basin] (interview with author 2008).

As displayed in Table 7.2, although expressed in different ways homesteaders and utopics both have a pragmatic relationship with the abandoned homesteads. To the dystopics, however, the abandoned homesteads play a much more crucial, or fundamental role, in their experience of Wonder Valley.

<b>ABANDONED HOMESTEADS</b>		
<b>Identity Group</b>	<b>Relationship with Abandoned Homesteads</b>	<b>Description of Relationship</b>
Homesteader	Pragmatic	If the structure does not intrude on everyday life, leave it alone. If the structure is problematic destroy it. Oppose any tax dollar investment
Dystopic	Fundamental	Most depend on these structures as their homes. Not able to live there if structures are preserved or destroyed
Utopic	Pragmatic	If the structure has historic or aesthetic value, it should be preserved by NGOs and government agencies. If it does not fit utopic criteria it should be destroyed.

**Table 7.2 Group relationships with abandoned homesteads.**

## **What is to be of the Ecotone?**

Change and transition is a constant of life and the life of places, but it is when this underlying pulse becomes the rhythm of a place that makes its identity different from the norm. This dynamic results in a contentious overlap and a tension that leads to a stressful transition between public and private domain. This dualism of the public land being both a blockade and bridge is a paradox and the foundation for the community identity because it is these common spaces of discord that tie the place together as an existential ecotone.

The common lands divide the private properties and are imbued with differing meanings by each identity group, creating an overlapping of intentions and place identities. This overlap occurs within an area that cannot be readily controlled by any of the identity groups and because of conflicting intentions for it the space is not only a place of interaction, but of tension. There is no way to remove the common lands or the other identity groups, so the tension has become part of the community's current identity. Wonder Valley's community identity, because of its geographic situation and residential intentions (consciously or unselfconsciously) create tension in space—to be a place of overlap of identities of opposing intentions. This interaction is defined by tension because of the residents' conflicting identities with place that are transferred to the common land. Although the interaction is contentious it provides a common thread that binds the “people” together to be “residents” and share a common experiential point.

Private residences provide anchors of dwelling in Wonder Valley. The *community* of Wonder Valley, however, is defined by the overlap of varying intentions, through the interactions in its common land. The residents of Wonder Valley have two fundamental types of experience, one of existential insideness towards their own property or space in which they have a feeling of at-homeness and dwelling, and the other relating to common land characterized by

the manifestation of overlapping dissimilar identities in an ambiguous and seemingly chaotic setting, creating its own experience of lives in a delicate tension, what I have described as an existential ecotone.

Wonder Valley derives its identity from the overlap of not necessarily adjacent regions, and landscapes, but of experiential intentions, creating a paradoxical situation as this ecotonal community's essence is derived from the overlapping edges of other place identities. Wonder Valley displays a sense of community arising from the overlap of separate place identities. Although this dynamic has not been explicitly described in human or experiential geography, there still have been essays and books dealing with the subject implicitly—for example, the Mexican American borderland described by Arreola and Curtis (1993). This book on Mexican border communities, the authors state that, although the Mexican border towns are geographically in Mexico, they exhibit a morphology and experience quite different than other Mexican towns as they are heavily influenced by their nearness to a contrasting culture. They explain that, because the border is not only porous but also an attraction to both cultures, the great deal of interaction makes the borderland less of a line that divides than a tie that binds. Thus, the cities along either side of the border are more closely linked to each other in many ways than with cities in their respective countries. Wonder Valley differs in scale but exhibits similar ecotonal qualities—Wonder Valley's common lands are similar to the U.S. Mexico border in that they derive their meaning from multiple source areas.

I believe that Wonder Valley is a type of place that has not yet been isolated or described as a distinct phenomenon of human geography and geographical experience. There is a symbiosis between each group and the place. The threshold is crowded, as three different ways of knowing and experiencing this space overlap each other and in this scenario, in a

contradictory fashion. The threshold boundary of control is inhabited by “others”—a space of a battle of wills and yet a buffer zone functioning to defend dwelling experiences and chaotically interspersed, creating life intension—an existential ecotone as the essential place identity for Wonder Valley.

The irritation caused by the opposing interactions and intentions is a feeling that extends outside the identity groups’ properties and ties the people and places together to create a community identity. The shared feeling of separation and tension gives rise to this peculiar phenomenon. The meaning of the common land of Wonder Valley is in a sense the residents’ feelings about the “community” as they wish it to be—a special and spatial extension of their experiential connection to place. In this way, the residents project their hopes, desires, and aspirations on the common land and to the idea of Wonder Valley. The multiple and conflicting intentions create a paradoxical space that is highly contentious yet creates the possibility of tying the scattered properties into a community, however dysfunctional.

Although the community is technically bound by the same regulations as other places in San Bernardino County and the rest of California, its particular location, size, relative isolation, and lack of government supervision leads to a situation where there is little to no enforcement of laws and regulations. This is significant because the lack of restrictions arising from a *negligentia sensus* allows virtually any type of activity to be part and parcel of a Wonder Valley residents’ lifeworld, affording a large degree of self-sufficiency, self-rule, and a unbounded range of ways of dwelling.

This anarchic dynamic produces an uncommon freedom in Wonder Valley. The only time a resident’s autonomy to express his or her relationship with the place is altered or abated is when a number of residents complain enough to garner the requisite attention, or when residents

“take the law into their own hands” and threaten to, or actually carry out violent acts against the targeted person and their property. Complaints against neighbors are infrequent, however, given the 2.5-to-5-acre property sizes and the buffer zones provided by BLM and abandoned properties. There is a general “live and let live” quality of the community, and the self-reliant attitude that calls for residents to handle problems on their own or at least within a local/neighborhood scale.

To county, state, and federal government sources, there are simply people who live “out there” in the desert wilderness of San Bernardino County. [A smattering of shacks separated from the sprawl of civilization with just enough mooring to resist the undertow of the sandy sea of the Mojave Desert.] Wonder Valley is not “out there” to its residents, however. It is a palimpsest of vernacular structures built by and housing people seeking the experience of dwelling. After reflecting on the relationships between the residents and their dwelling space, I uncovered two different intensities of *identities with* the spaces that the residents have immediate control over. Homesteaders and utopics relate to their spaces via conflicting modalities of *existential insideness*, while the dystopics typify *existential outsideness* (Figures 1.1).

The homesteaders and utopics share the same strength of place identity with their property best expressed as existential insideness. Existential insideness is a distinct way in which to relate to one’s world, a feeling of attachment and at-homeness marks it in such a way that one feels “this is the place” where he or she belongs. It is the deepest kind of place experience and the one toward which we probably all yearn. Although both homesteaders and utopics share this intimate connection to *their* space within Wonder Valley, the manner in which they express the connection is conflicting. As a result, the residents experiencing existential insideness can be clearly separated into the subgroups of “homesteader insideness” and “utopic insideness.”

Homesteader insideness is a close connection to the dwelling as a work in progress. The desert is understood as beautiful, but the land within their property line is considered a blank space to allowing the homesteader the freedom to build and improve the land. In this relationship nature is held in check, as the flora and fauna are viewed as part of a beautiful landscape as long as the wilderness is kept outside of their property boundaries. The surrounding desert landscape helps to frame their creations. The homesteaders' land is a reflection of their ability to push back and hold back the chaos of the desert wilderness.

In contrast, the utopic insideness identity views home as a partial reflection of the surrounding desert's inherent sacred power. The utopics reflect upon the land's inherent beauty and overall significance of the environs when they construct or remodel their dwellings and properties. Furthermore, they use their particular creative talents to reflect the essence of the desert landscape to others to share the meaningfulness of their sacred surroundings. To educe a feeling of reverence, the utopics create structures, landscapes, music, film, and various visual art projects that are shared with fellow utopics, other residents, and visitors and also to defend the image and essence of the land from residential and outsider induced damages.

Existential outsideness can either be an intense disconnection with a certain place—for example, a building or space that is inaccessible to you despite your desire to enter and experience it—or a place that an individual has access to but whose intense connection is dysfunctional and dreadful, such as a prison, hospital, war zone, or even a “home” plagued by domestic abuse. The dystopics of Wonder Valley represent both of these types of existential outsideness in that they have a tenuous criminal connection to the land that is both dysfunctional and dreadful. Just as they are forced to create private places on public land, they are unable to

enter private land publicly. Their life is based on the irrational premise that they wish they could be somewhere else but hope that they can stay where they are for as long as possible.

While interviewing residents and observing their daily habits, I noticed that there was an unusually heightened concern for and maintenance of the demarcation of the place they occupy. One landscape element that all three identity groups had in common however, was an intense concern with demarcating their property from neighboring public or private tracts of land. This concern with boundaries is quite important because it prefaces the residents' feelings about what is outside their property and control, which ultimately helps to understand Wonder Valley's community identity.

At first I thought the residents' unease with property lines was due to the prevalence of theft or perhaps to clarify boundaries between neighbors. The residents I spoke with, however, felt break-ins were inevitable or relied upon advanced methods for security. Furthermore, none of the residents indicated that they wished to extend their property at the expense of their neighbors or felt that their neighbors would do something similar. In Wonder Valley, a resident's private property is held in abnormally high regard, and, surprisingly, the feeling is extended to fellow residents. No matter how much hatred exists between groups or individuals, none of the residents openly advocated doing any harm to another person's property, even if the property is of a different group, a squatter, or "meth" producer. The only exception was if a resident was known to have stolen from or damaged the property of another resident. At that point I was told that sometimes the police are notified, but many times (especially among the homesteaders and dystopics) "the law is taken into their own hands" and they "throw" the offending party out of the community. This is done by razing their property or through threats of physical violence.

The unusual attention residents spent on their property boundary remained a mystery through most of the research. Eventually, I found that this attention served two primary purposes. First, it distinguished their land—their place—from desert space. Each identity group and every resident made their mark to separate their world from the ambiguous space that the desert landscape provides. Unlike cities, suburbs, or even the rural landscape, there are very few indicators of what is private land and what is just another wave in the sea of sand. The homesteaders viewed the boundary as a sort of finish line that they raced to, to build towards, the dystopics’ “trash boundaries” were one of the few marks proving their existence, and the utopics also marked their property to denote a small environmental footprint and to celebrate their nearness to nature.

Second, although residents do not wish to take over a neighbor’s property, they consciously put effort into demonstrating who, or more specifically, what group, lives where. As discussed in earlier chapters, there are certain clues to the different groups’ cultures—several broken-down automobiles and various mechanical parts strewn throughout a property is a common dystopic marker, while homesteader landscapes feature American flags and a smooth sandscape. Yet again, a drastically improved home but with natural looking vegetation is common among the utopics. These residential landscapes are not just symbolic, however. Their property and the structures upon it represent the most significant part of their experience of Wonder Valley. The homesteaders are constantly clearing the desert to expand the spatial extent and level of control over their enclaves of civilization. The dystopics use abandoned property as clandestine factories or as dysfunctional dwellings. Utopics use their property to either share the beauty of the place with others through their creative arts, or as bunkers on the front lines in the war to defend the inherent rights of the desert’s flora and fauna.



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In December 1986 the Irish rock band U2 flew to Los Angeles to film a music video and conduct photo shoots in the surrounding desert wilderness in support of their upcoming release tentatively entitled “The Desert Album.” Before recording began, the album was to be called the “Two Americas,” highlighting the band’s mixed emotions for American culture and politics. As they recorded the album, however, they noticed that desert imagery permeated the songs, and the entire mood of the compilation providing a common thread and an otherworldly atmosphere. After filming in Los Angeles, the band drove towards Death Valley, their principle photo-shoot location. The shortened winter days and unfamiliarity of the desert roads forced the group to stay overnight at the first lodging they came upon—Twentynine Palm’s Harmony Motel.



**Figure 7.10 Edge, guitarist for U2, outside of an abandoned homestead in Wonder Valley, 1986 (photograph by Anton Corbijn).**

The next morning the band departed for Death Valley, but just minutes after they left, the photographers saw a strange landscape that compelled them to stop—Wonder Valley during the height of the dystopic influence. The photographs, however, eventually lost their place on the album to a lone Joshua Tree outside of Death Valley, and the band yet again renamed the album,

“The Joshua Tree.” After the release of the album, Rolling Stone writer Steve Pond noted that the desert images created by lead photographer Anton Corbijn, the social and political messages of the songs, and the atmospheric quality of the music perfectly fit the album’s major theme of resilience in the face of desolation (Pond 1987).

Resilience in the face of desolation is a fitting description for the astonishing permanence of Wonder Valley. Most of the cabins that were there for U2’s wonderment in December of 1986 were still there for my first encounter with the place in December of 1994, and hundreds still pepper the Wonder Valley landscape in 2010. After all these years, many abandoned homesteads still include a cabin that looks like it may crumble any moment but yet still stands as it has for decades, but what about the future?

If this overlap were altered, then the entire meaning of Wonder Valley—the “Wonder Valley-ness” of Wonder Valley—would be changed. The private property allows each individual of each group to connect to the place in a specific way, but it is this overlapping of the groups that is key. Wonder Valley would be a completely different place if these common areas became entirely dystopic, utopic, or homesteader. Some people thrive in places that are defined by struggle. They are misfits, but what of misfits dwelling in a misfit community? Does this add to increased stability or volatility? In Wonder Valley’s case, the answer is yes. Here, instability is stability. In the future if the former changes to the latter, the ecotone is destroyed. Wonder Valley becomes a different kind of community—special, a bit confusing, and delicate. Residents of Wonder Valley do not know what change will bring, but they know it will eventually change. This feeling of impermanence is best described by Greg Davis when I asked him of Wonder Valley’s future. He replied, “The place has not yet become what it is not.”

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*Participants Interviewed by Author from 2005-2010*

**Name (Period of Interaction)**

Alexander, J. (2006-2008)

Alvarado, J. (2007)

Alvarado M. (2007)

Baker, J. (2007)

Benson, J. (2006-2007)

Benson, K. (2007)

Booker (2007-2008)

Carraher, C. (2006-2008)

Carter, A. (2005-2009)

Carter L. (2005-2009)

Chassie, P. (2006.)

Daniels, J. (2006-2008)

Daniels, R. (2006-2008)

Davis, G. (2006-2009)

Dennis, R. (2006-2009)

Dube, M. (2006-2008)

Dylan, M. (2007-2008)

Greenwood, M. (2008-2009)

Harris, B. (2007-2008)

Hillier, W. (2008-2009)

Hoffman, P. (2007-2009)

Homer, J. (2006-2008)

Howard, R. (2006-2008).

Huffington, M. (2007-2009)

Klasky, P. (2006-2008)

Martin, H. (2006-2007)

Miller (2007-2008)

Merrick, T. (2007-2008)

Moon, N. (2006-2008)

Moran, D. (2005-2007)

Nelson (2006-2007)

Ostrander, Joe. (2005-2010)

Ostrander, Judy (2005-2009)

Ostrander, G. (2005-2009)

Perry, J. (2008-2009)

Scott (2006-2008)

Shipley, H. (2007-2009)

Smith, P (2005-2008)

Stockman, J. (2008-2009)

Stringfellow, K. (2008-2010)

Turner, V. (2006-2008)

Vaughn, B. (2007-2008)

Williams (2005-2006)

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philipmklasky.com (accessed from 2009-2010)